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BEFORE SUNSET

WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

Before Sunset stands in that small class of books which may rightly be called great. It is a long book, for Mrs. Wingate has covered a vast canvas in this picture of the great Mongol invasion of mediæval Russia (Rus); but in her story of Alexander Nevski, Prince of Novgorod, born 1219, and one of the greatest commanders of his time, the reader is held by the vivid colourfulness of the narrative, the intense drama of the warrior prince's unswerving devotion to his beloved Novgorod, and the deep erudition displayed by the author. Mrs. Wingate has skilfully blended fiction with fact, and *Before Sunset* must unhesitatingly be placed in the highest class of historical novels. As an authentic portrait of the wonderful military genius who is its central figure, and as a very vivid and truthful picture of ancient Russia, it is not likely to be surpassed.

BEFORE SUNSET

by

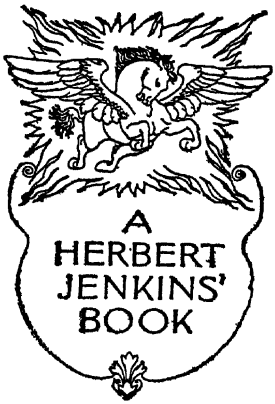
MRS. ALFRED WINGATE

Author of "A Servant of the Mightiest," "Jên," etc.

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"Never the Spirit was born; the spirit shall cease to be never;
Never was time it was not; End and Beginning are dreams.
Birthless and deathless and changeless remaineth the spirit for ever;
Death hath not changed it at all, dead though the house of it seems."

The Song Celestial, or *Bhagavad-Gita*. Chapter 2. (From the *Mahabharata*.)

Trans. by Sir Edwin Arnold.

BEFORE SUNSET

I

ONCE on a remote time, in the wide sad country of the south-eastern steppes, a young gallant met and defeated in single combat a strong warrior of the nomad Pecheneg tribe, the ancient enemies of his people. According to the legend, the young gallant was fair to behold. His face was white as winter snow, his eyes were keen as a hawk's, and his brows were like sable. And, when he slew the dark barbarian, the opposing army cried with a loud voice: "Pereshla Slava!" ("Departed is the glory!") Then that country was first called by the Swedish name Pereyaslavl, but afterwards by the Finnish name Rus. And to this day it remains Sviataia Rus or Holy Russia.

For though there be many to lament now that the glory is departed, what power of evil shall crush the immortal soul, what grief shall rob the Slav race of its honour?

O soul of the generous earth, have you forgotten that to be Slav is to be glorious and not enslaved? O great little soul, awake and remember the days of long ago, before your sun had set, before you were bound in serfdom by Muscovy or by present tyranny.

Across the marshlands of the north and down the mighty river Dnieper came, in the old time, the Varangians or Vikings of Scandinavia. A stalwart man was their prince Oleg, broad-chested as a bull, with cold blue eyes, long fair moustaches and a

single tuft of hair showing beneath the winged helmet on his brow. In one ear he wore a golden ring set with a ruby and two pearls, and on land he marched, like a panther stalking its prey, at the head of his army, using a saddle as a pillow when he slept on the ground at night. But, when they floated on the bosom of Mother Nepra, that great river, he lay at his ease in one of their wide barges and sang the songs of the north.

Oleg was the relative of Rurik, left behind near the inland sea, Lake Ladoga, and already established there in a confederation of trading villages, to be known later as the province of Novgorod.

Oleg, adventuring further, found Rurik's Norsemen, hardy pioneers, before him in a fair settlement on the high banks of the Dnieper. They had taken it from the nomads of the steppes and now Oleg took it from Askold of Dir and, after reigning there himself, bequeathed it, as the principality of Kiev, to Rurik's son Igor.

A famous man was Oleg, the first to unite the pastoral Slavs, who had invited Scandinavian protection against Asiatic hordes, with the Finnish merchants of the north and with his own warrior people; the first also to make a treaty of peace, fruitful in trade, between all these and the Byzantine Empire across the Black Sea.

And Oleg died, as had been foretold, through his favourite horse. For though the horse died first, its skull harboured a venomous serpent and Oleg's foot, passing near the skull, was bitten. . . .

Then Igor married Princess Olga, whom the ballads call All-wise Helen. She had received that name in baptism, having learnt the Christian faith at Tsargrad, the capital of Byzantium, but she was equally renowned by either title and is strangely enough remembered as Saint Olga and as pagan Helen. Through her power, her grandsons ruled over Novgorod and over Kiev and over the wild forest dwellers of the north-east. Yet there was no love between these princes then or thereafter, nor was Christianity established till Vladimir I of Novgorod embraced, with a Greek wife, the Orthodox Church, and overthrew the ancient idols.

Then down went Perun, god of thunder, with his head of silver and his beard of gold; down went Stribog, god of the winds, and down went Veles, god of cattle. And in the place of their statues rose the gilt-domed churches of Kiev, lovely Kiev, rising like a towered city pictured in a fairy tale, on the high bank of the Dnieper.

With the passing of the old gods, the Scandinavian influence also gradually passed, absorbed by the Slav soul. But this Slav soul kept with its orthodoxy an imperishable memory of older and more familiar paganism. The ikons that were set up in every village and every house were a protection against the dark invisible powers of the Forest Thunderer whose weight is more than earth can bear, and of Div, the malignant bird, the robber of the windy steppes, not to mention the little devil of the dwelling-place, who haunts the stove, and many others

of his kind. But there were beneficent powers, besides those inherent in the ikons. There was Volkh, the warrior wizard, who mysteriously pursued the invader, like a swift grey wolf. And there was the spirit of Mikula, the giant peasant, the personification of cultivating energy, the immortal soul of Russia.

Third in descent from Vladimir I came Vladimir II, surnamed Monomach, as Grand Prince uniting all Russia, which at that mediæval period was slightly smaller than the entire British Isles.

The country was bounded on the east by the river Don, on the west by the provinces of Volynia and Minsk. Finnish tribes occupied the coast of Esthonia and the northern Baltic, and Lithuania cut the Slavonic people off from the Gulf of Riga. The Euxine coast lands and southern steppes were the galloping grounds of various Asiatic hordes: by turn, Scythians, Khazars, Pechenegs, or Polovtsi.

Unity was the result of perpetual wars against the marauding tribes and subsequent temporary alliances with the Polovtsi. And unity was short-lived.

For, according to an old song: "Those were the days when strife was sown, when it grew as grain in the field grows, when men's lives were shortened by princes' struggles, when the cry of the earth tiller was heard only rarely, but often the screams of the crows wrangling over corpses."

In fact, civil war raged throughout Russia, due to a system of appanages, by which seniority of

succession passed not to a ruler's sons, but to his brothers, who vacated their own principalities to seize by turn the capital.

With Monomach, who said: "It is neither fasting, nor solitude, nor the monastic life that will give you life eternal: it is well doing," prosperity departed. He left the city of Novgorod, which had sprung up on the shores of the river Volkhov and Lake Ilmen and which, as a trading capital, was superseding Kiev, to his son Mstislav and, while other sons occupied various cities, the youngest, Yuri, founded a separate settlement on the site of an insignificant but central village, afterwards known as Moscow.

Yuri's son, Andrei, not content with this lowly place and filled with ambition and religious zeal, gained possession of a marvellous picture of the Holy Virgin, brought from Tsargrad, and said to have been painted by Saint Luke. Horses, drawing the wagon that carried the sacred ikon, refused to cross a certain river in central Russia. It was a sign of the Divine will. The wagon was unloaded on the spot, the place was called the Love of God and a magnificent cathedral was built there, to hold the picture and to become the centre of the new capital city Vladimir. The district comprised Moscow, Ryazan and, on the east, the state of Nizni Novgorod, where a little later the town of that name was built, to become famous in time for its oriental fair.

The city of Vladimir was now more important

and more sacred than Kiev, by reason of its possession of the miraculous ikon. Moreover, it stood as the opponent of the north-western city of Novgorod, which claimed control of the whole northern region.

Andrei, a beneficent prince, beloved of his people but hated by jealous princes and ambitious boyars (nobles), attacked the infidel Bulgars on his eastern frontier and carried with him into battle the picture of the Vladimir Mother of God. She, as his Commanderess, gave him a great victory, and the occasion was called The Day of the Merciful Saviour. Tragic was the death of Andrei, betrayed by his wife and murdered by his boyars, but great is the reverence in which his memory is still held by his people.

Then the Vladimir Mother of God was banished for a time from the city, but the people rose against the despotic boyars and summoned Andrei's brother Vsevolod to rule them.

§

While civil war continued in the south and west, with frequent raids against the Polovtsi, leading to nothing but subsequent alliances with that tribe, Vsevolod established his rule in central Russia.

He had a great heart. The people of Vladimir claimed the punishment of two young orphan princes, whom the boyars had nominated to succeed the murdered Andrei. These youths, said the sovereign people, should only be freed if they were blinded. Vsevolod showed them to the angry populace with bloody eyes, but when they were liberated,

lo! their sight had not suffered. It was surely a heavenly miracle, and none knew that Vsevolod had caused mere flesh wounds to be inflicted above the brows.

Great and good was the heart of Prince Vsevolod of Vladimir. He loved his people and was beloved of them. He and they lived in a bond of mutual dependence, forming one unit, while the boyars, perpetually at variance, formed a number of units, each acting for itself.

Also Vsevolod dearly loved his lady wife, with the result that their family was so large in number that he came to be known as Big Nest.

See Father Big Nest, a big man, tall and dignified, with his broad brow, shrewd grey eyes, long fair beard and light brown hair falling on the shoulders behind and shaved to leave a long tuft on the crown of the head. His movements were slow and heavy, but when laughter shook his massive frame, he showed his beautiful white teeth and chuckled like a child.

He wore a tunic of crimson cloth, girdled with a leather belt over dark trousers, bound round the legs with strips of felt. On his feet were bast shoes, on his breast hung a golden chain and on his fingers he wore rings of silver and gold. Generally he appeared thus simply clad, even for a ceremonious occasion. But sometimes he would consent to don his high boots of soft leather and his long straight robe of Byzantine design, with a flowing fur-lined mantle. Then indeed was Big

Nest a dignified and kingly figure, like one of the saints pictured in the Greek ikons.

But, in the fulness of time, old Big Nest, feeling death near, appointed his first-born son, Constantine, to succeed him in the rule of Vladimir, while his second son, Yuri, held Rostov in the north, and further still, in the north-west, his third son, Yaroslav, looked for the control of Novgorod, through a marriage with the daughter of Mstislav, prince of that district.

§

The young prince Yaroslav went to Novgorod to marry the fair princess Feodosia. The mighty city of Novgorod, surrounded by bogs and swamps, then lay on both sides of the broad river Volkhov. Its commerce was immense and its citizens, controlled only by their own Véché (or general assembly), were entirely free and independent. The east bank of the river was the commercial quarter and the west was the Side of Saint Sophia, the great cathedral, with other famous churches and residences.

Within the tower the Kremlin, or fortress, with its stone towers and earthen ramparts, was noted chiefly, not for its defensive strength, but for its courtyard, which was the favourite meeting-place for popular assemblies. Here a great bell used to summon the people to proclaim their will. And this will was supreme, above that of the Archbishop, above that of the chief civil officer of the town, the posadnik, who held annual office, above even that

of the ruling prince, who was only secure so long as he could command a majority in the Véché. If priest, posadnik or prince failed to satisfy the people, the people by right showed him the way out. And sometimes this way out was over the parapet of one of the river bridges and into the deep waters of the Volkhov.

Never was there a more democratic state, never a more republican spirit than that of Great Lord Novgorod.

As it happened, the present prince, Mstislav the Gallant, was approved. Novgorod, wearied by its own rebellions, had hailed him as a peace-maker within and as a defender without against the Chud or Finnish tribesmen, who were always ready to attack.

Mstislav, restless, adventurous and diplomatic, had said tactfully: "I bow to the Holy Sophia, to the grave of my father who there lies buried, and to the Novgorodians. I come to you pitying my native land."

So, for a time, Mstislav was established, and now his daughter Feodosia was to be given in marriage to young Yaroslav, son of Vsevolod Big Nest.

There was something tragic in the beauty of Yaroslav. His slender figure, his long pale hands, his straight bleached hair and his blue eyes with their dark lashes marked the dreamer rather than the man of action, the poet rather than the soldier. In other lands, as the third son, he would have been the fortunate youth. Here he was haunted by Death the Terrible, the wandering witch, who

would, in the end, draw out her iron sword and cut through his sinews.

After the preliminary bridal feast and the wedding ceremony at the cathedral of Saint Sophia, Prince Yaroslav, attended by his druzhina, or train of personal friends, brought the Princess Feodosia back to her father's splendid palace, built of white stone.

Sledges and horsemen entered first the great courtyard, which was surrounded by a fence, through a massive gateway decorated with carvings and hung with ikons. The broad pathway to the palace was spread with carpets; and round the scattered buildings, united by passages, that constituted the mansion, stretched lawns and gardens.

At the steps of the threshold, the company dismounted. The sledges moved away and slaves then tied the saddle-horses to gilded rings set in the door columns and, taking down the cups that hung there on silver chains, served them filled with wine and honey.

Then Yaroslav and his father-in-law led the bride, whose dark unbound hair and face were still covered by a flowing veil, up a stairway, sculptured with the figures of heavenly bodies, animals and birds and having hand-rails of black marble.

Below this stairway, a crowd of courtiers and servants watched the fine procession. Above it lay a carpeted verandah, where Feodosia was received by her waiting-women and removed to prepare for the consummation of the marriage.

Meanwhile, the men passed through a richly decorated doorway to the great central hall. Here the wooden walls were covered with carvings and the floor of walrus horn with tapestries. But more beautiful than these was the wide casement window of foreign glass, through which shone the rosy light of the setting sun. At one end of the hall stood a large stove of green glazed tiles, in which peat and pinewood were burning. Near this a troop of musicians were seated on wooden stools, softly playing on their stringed instruments and occasionally breaking into song.

The two princes lingered here for a while with their guests and then went on to the inner nuptial chamber, to await the bride.

Yaroslav was hardly yet acquainted with his lady. His courtship had been brief, ceremonious and confined by the strictest religious rites. To-day, in the cathedral, he had been aware of a slight, radiant figure at his side and, after they had partaken together of the Holy Sacrament, he had laid his cold lips on her cold cheeks and had only felt: "This is Novgorod. Some day this shall be my Novgorod."

Now she would come to him as a woman, and he would be left to make her his own, when she had enacted the final ceremony of kneeling at his feet and drawing off his boots. For thus must the brides of Russia acknowledge their lords.

To-morrow there would be the great feast, when they would cut and eat together the wedding cake,

symbol of their union, and there would be immense rejoicing. Meanwhile, to-night and its chance of happiness were enough. Why did she delay? . . . What was Mstislav saying?

Mstislav was thinking chiefly of their country, and at last he succeeded in engaging Yaroslav's attention with low-spoken words.

"Kiev is at peace now under Michael of Chernigov. But there is no peace in Galicia. From the west, from Poland and from Hungary, trouble ever threatens. Daniel of Galitch, who has married my other daughter, has been despoiled of his inheritance by Poland. And now Poland seeks my aid against Hungary. Yet how shall there be any alliance between the Orthodox and the Latin? Rather will the Latin combine against the Orthodox."

"Family feuds, even among the Orthodox, are the opportunity of the foreigner," said Yaroslav with a slow smile.

"I shall support Daniel," said Mstislav stoutly. "And may there be no more feuds between the rest of us. You will stay here at Novgorod during my absence and your brother Constantine will hold Vladimir, while your other brother Yuri stays content at Rostov."

At this moment, Feodosia, ushered by her two chief ladies, entered the room. Her dark hair had been braided and wound round her small, proud head, which was veiled as before, but surmounted now with the bridal crown. She advanced straight to her father and bowed before him without raising

her eyes. Then she sank low with exquisite grace at the feet of Yaroslav. This was the signal for the two ladies to remove her crown and veil and to withdraw.

Her lovely face, cold as frost that burns the naked flesh, was revealed. She had the expression of a scornful child, or of an angry angel, pale and fierce, as she leant forward and laid her hands on Yaroslav's boot.

He, seated on a wooden bench beside the bedstead, bent down and loosened the boot. She gave it a pull. Through nervousness (or was it by design?) the pull was so abrupt that Yaroslav lost his balance and fell over sideways.

Mstislav, looking on and smiling, burst into a roar of laughter. The boot was off and Feodosia, crouching on the floor, held it aloft and gave her father a glance of subtle mischief.

She was untamed and maddening, the personification of free Novgorod. Purpose and passion were suddenly born in the gaze of Yaroslav. He sprang to his feet and caught her up in his arms.

"You shall love me yet, lady," he cried, "and the other boot shall wait till then. But if the father that bred you supports my brother Constantine at Vladimir, I will support my brother Yuri against them both. For the way of Mstislav shall never be my way, and may God judge between us and Great Lord Novgorod hold the stakes!"

Prince Mstislav hastened to pacify him, chided

his daughter, blessed them both and left them alone together.

And in the great central hall the Slav musicians could be heard softly plucking their stringed instruments and singing in tones that rose ever sweeter and wilder:

"Down the dark river the swans fly calling
One to the other, and night is falling;
Come, little brother, delight is waiting,
This is the hour for love and mating.
The time of mating should find you bolder,
The maid is ready, so take and hold her;
Come, little brother, as you are bidden,
The night is falling, her face is hidden,
The devil himself is out on the midden
And your love, your darling, is near!"

II

MSTISLAV the Gallant, having seen his daughter Feodosia married, went off like the wind. For his was a restless, energetic temperament, ever embroiled with various affairs. And, though he could be diplomatic enough for his own advantage, he did not hesitate to impose himself hotly on anyone less self-reliant than himself.

First he rode to help Daniel of Galicia with Polovtsi auxiliaries on the Dniester river, where Daniel was escaping the armies of Poland and Hungary. Then rumours of trouble at Novgorod under his other son-in-law, Yaroslav, brought him swiftly back there.

The people of Novgorod wanted Mstislav as their prince, but the boyars were secretly supporting Yaroslav, who, at the same time, was plotting with Yuri to drive Constantine out of the capital, Vladimir. This was not the moment, therefore, to satisfy Novgorod.

Mstislav appeared in the Véché and said suavely:

"You are free to choose your own princes. I have other business in Russia."

He meant that if the people did not approve their present ruler they could show him the way out and he, Mstislav, was not responsible. Then he left the place and tried to make peace between Yuri and Constantine. His effort was useless. Yuri had collected a great force, Yaroslav was preparing to join him and both insisted on war.

"The power may be yours," said Mstislav grandly to them, "but ours is the right."

Yaroslav, who loved his wife, Feodosia, but had not been able to win her love, laughed bitterly.

"Let the stake be Novgorod and Feodosia," he answered, "and let the issue be, who has the greater right; he who is chosen by the boyars or he who is chosen by the people, the husband or the father!"

The princess remained in the city, while Yaroslav went to war.

On a bright spring morning, they were ready for battle, south of Vladimir, on the Lipetsk river, a tributary of the Don.

Constantine, who was a scholar rather than a soldier, a man of piety and erudition rather than a man of action, dreaded the outcome. Yuri and Yaroslav boasted of their might, though in the past they had studied with their brother Constantine and owed much to his zeal.

But the heart of Mstislav glowed with enthusiasm. To his soldiers he said: "Brothers, we have come to the centre of the enemies' country. If we flee, none of us shall escape. Look not back in this contest! Forget homes, wives and children! Fight to the death. Hit hard. God is in truth, not in numbers! Forward, on foot or on horseback, forward!"

A roar of excitement answered him. The men threw off their armour and helmets and rushed into the fight with spears and clubs.

"May God not permit us to abandon good com-

rades," shouted Mstislav, and led them through the midst of the fray, wielding his battle-axe.

For him, it was "the monstrous victory." Yuri and Yaroslav fled from their defeated and slaughtered army. The one had need of five horses, till he rode into panic-stricken Vladimir, which was afterwards besieged and regained by Constantine. The other abandoned Novgorod, Feodosia and hope and sought shelter in the small northern town called Pereyaslavl Beyond the Forest. Then back rushed Mstislav to Galicia, where the Latin Church was triumphant under Polish and Hungarian rulers who had usurped the country from Daniel. The traitorous boyars sided with the Latins against their rightful ruler and the Orthodox people. But, when Mstislav attacked them with his Polovtsi legions, the Orthodox faith triumphed and its deliverer was called, "the shining sun, the bright falcon."

No one else could rule Galicia so well as he. Alas for Daniel! Mstislav made peace with Hungary, for now diplomacy appealed to him most. Daniel was bereft of Galitch and left with no territory but its borderlands.

Meanwhile, Constantine of Vladimir, with a brotherly affection rare in those days, had sought out Yuri from exile. They had made friends; they had agreed that the fault was that of Yaroslav and doubtless there had been a woman in it. When Constantine died soon after, Yuri inherited Vladimir and "the monstrous victory" need never have been gained.

But what of Yaroslav? Novgorod had now no prince. Mstislav far away in the south was forgotten by the north. Yaroslav, robbed of his wife, who had joined her father in the south, might still hold Novgorod. In the heart of the tragic youth, bruised and desolate, wisdom dawned. He left Pereyaslavl Beyond the Forest graver and stronger and presented himself to Great Lord Novgorod.

"I have forfeited the lady Feodosia. I have learned that a boastful man cannot hold a woman. I loved her, but I could not win her heart. Now, if you will have me, I will devote myself to you and stand as your protector against the Chud tribes and the Nemtsy behind them."

Thus he indicated the ancient north-western enemies of Russia and particularly the Teutonic foreigners, known as Nemtsy, who had appeared in the form of militarist Catholic missionaries on the Baltic coast.

Novgorod, quick to revolt and as quick to forget, welcomed him. Even the most democratic of republics requires a figure-head. For though the muzhiki, "the free folk," numbering craftsmen and workmen, actually ruled the place, above them, nominally, were the tradesmen, the merchants and the capitalists who had much to lose through disorder. The upper classes saw in Yaroslav a possible leader of their feeble and unreliable army. And though the people said of him: "He will never turn the river Volkhov into kvas," meaning that he would not prove himself brilliant, he suited them

the better for that reason and they no longer regretted Mstislav.

§

On a winter day, the prince walked unattended through the broad streets of the city. Anywhere else such freedom from ceremony would hardly have been possible, but in free Novgorod a man might please himself, so long as he did not displease the Véché.

He had been to the famous cathedral of Saint Sohpia, built by his ancestor Yaroslav the Law-Maker, son of Vladimir I, at the bottom of Piskupli Street on the bank of the Volkhov river. He had presented to the church the richly embroidered robe that he had worn at his wedding. That robe would henceforth be hung within the cathedral on holy days, among other bejewelled ecclesiastical robes, attached to two ropes stretched between the Golden Gate and the Bishop's Entrance. Thus he had made sacrifice of the passion that had stirred him.

Numerous slaves, including husbandmen from the southern wheat lands, ruined by civil war, had swept the centre of the street free of the deep snow, which was now banked on either side. The wooden houses with their projecting beams and overhanging gables, carved with intricate ornament, stood each in its own courtyard surrounded by a fence. The golden cupolas of the churches shone in the wintry sunlight.

Under the wide arch of the pale blue sky there was a feeling of infinite space and liberty. Men,

wearing long belted coats of sheepskin or of light grey cloth, passed on skis. Their figures were sturdy, their faces thin and hard, with fine-cut features. Some of them were trappers or fishermen from the desolate outlying land of moor and marsh, where no agriculture is possible and where the north wind, howling over stream bed and lichened rock, bends the rowan tree to the ground and stunts the growth of birch and alder.

A party of rich huntsmen, clad in furs, rode by in a sledge drawn by three horses, in goose file, called "the troika." The nostrils of the horses were choked with frozen moisture and they shook their heads till the bells on their harness rang again. From the laughing faces of the huntsmen rose the mist of their own breath.

Women in hooded mantles, with children running beside them and servants following them, were returning to their homes from one of the fashionable bath-houses. For the Novgorodians were a cleanly people, much addicted to the use of these baths.

As Yaroslav came to one of the bridges that spanned the Volkhov river, another sledge and troika passed him and suddenly stopped. A servant descended from the rear, came back to him and spoke in the southern dialect.

"God bless you, sir! Can you tell us whether Prince Yaroslav, son of Vsevolod, is at present in Novgorod?"

"God bless you also. I am he."

"Christ have mercy," said the man, crossing him-

self and bowing. "My mistress is the lady Feodosia Mstislovna. I beg your honour's pardon, but she is in the sledge there and sent me to ask you."

Had she returned to find him, or would she fly directly he showed himself? He went towards the sledge. He took off his fur cap and held it to his breast like a peasant. He gazed at her with a mournful, questioning smile. She knew him and she was more beautiful than before. Under her cloak of ermine she wore a long dress of green cloth, patterned with red and blue flowers. On her head was a little hat of gold-coloured felt, secured by a green kerchief tied under her chin. She stretched out her hands, covered with gloves of soft leather embroidered with silk and edged with fur.

"Little husband," she said softly, "am I too late to draw off the other boot?"

"Do you come to me or only to Novgorod?" he said.

"I am weary of the south. I am wedded and yet unwed. If you have any love left for me, I will be your faithful wife. See, Yaroslav, I wear the talisman of all Novgorod women." She drew her cloak aside and showed him, hanging on her breast, a small flat golden box, from the ring of which was suspended a sheathed dagger. "I did not know its value till we were parted."

"You are proud and cold and so you are chaste," he answered. "Not for that did I love you, but because I could not help myself. Are you come now to rob me of strength again, to deceive me in the belief that I can control Novgorod and then to

flout me? Ride on, lady! I had rather drown myself in this river than take you back."

She laid her little hands tightly on his arm. Tears gathered in her dark eyes.

"Yaroslav, have pity. I love you. It was my father that separated us."

"It was your will."

"Never. I had no will then—I did not know. Now I desire to bear your children. O Yaroslav, our son shall rule Novgorod. Little husband, may not our union still be blessed? Dear one, I repent. Be kind!"

He groaned and tried to turn away. She descended from the sledge and held him closer. She whispered quick and urgent.

He thought that she had been sent by her father to keep Novgorod for Mstislav, perhaps to reawaken hostility in Novgorod against himself, Yaroslav. And for this he hated her. Yet presently she compelled him. He could not resist her. She was Novgorod, free and powerful. In her eyes he saw pity, even as she asked it of him. She drew him into the sledge, she wound her arms round him and held his head against her breast. Together they drove to the palace, the triumphant lady Feodosia and the tragic prince Yaroslav.

§

Their first-born son was small and delicate and he was called Fédor. His mother looked at him askance. No weakling, she knew, could ever hold Novgorod. Why had she, so strong and indepen-

dent, born so poor a child? Could it be that Yaroslav did not love her well enough? He was gentle when she would have had him fierce. He yielded to her when she wanted his mastery. His passion for her appeared to be dead and the situation was now curiously reversed. She, who had been cold, was now on fire and he, who had been hot and daring, was now self-controlled and self-sufficient.

She turned to religion for comfort. The holy ikons of the Greek Church were alone beautiful enough to satisfy her soul. The strange purity of the Byzantine art saturated her with a sense of peace. From a golden frame the angular, enamelled face of the Mother of God, clothed in silver and crowned with turquoise and pearl and emerald, looked calmly out on her, secure in the possession of the perfect Child.

Or the adult, beardless Christ, sublime and agonised, painted upon wood, with rubies set in His hands, His feet and His side, seemed to say to her: "I was that beloved Son. Come unto Me, all ye who labour and are heavy laden."

With much prayer and fasting, Feodosia herself came to resemble one of the saints. Then at last a second son was born to her, lusty and lovely as a cherub. He was named Alexander, and great rejoicing welcomed his arrival.

He came like the radiant coming of spring to ice-bound Novgorod, for his birthday was at the end of the month of May.

Out on the marshes, where white or red mosses

afforded the only usual vegetation, blue aconite flowers and scarlet poppies were beginning to bloom. Roads that had been impassable a little earlier, through melting snow, now began to dry and harden.

In more fertile districts of Russia, this, the most enchanting of the seasons, appeared clad in a robe of vivid green. Here spring-time had a different and peculiar charm. And the infant Alexander was surely the child of the northern spring and of free Novgorod.

He brought happiness to all who beheld him. His rounded, sturdy limbs, his large dark blue eyes and his regular features, gave promise of exceptional physical beauty. He was, besides, a placid, contended child, very different from the fretful Fédor. He was delightful when he gazed at his mother or at his nurses in solemn wonderment, and still more attractive as he grew older and developed a spirit of enterprise. The colour returned to Feodosia's pale face and the laughter to her lips. She played with her two babies by the hour and loved Fédor because he was the brother of Alexander. Even Yaroslav came under the dominion of his second son. He held the little Alexander in his arms and pressed his lips to the little head covered with fair curls.

"You blessed boy," he said, "how proud I am of you!"

The day came when, still at a tender age, Alexander had to be shorn of his curls and would, by this solemn and ancient ceremony, be introduced to manhood. Henceforth he would be removed

from the care of women and would, under his tutors, be considered a citizen of Novgorod. The ceremony, which had already of course been enacted for Fédor, was the sacred consecration of the prince to the service of God, and the curls were his first sacrifice.

Led by his father and mother, Alexander appeared at the Kings' Gate of the high altar of Holy Sophia. This was for him a marvellous occasion. He liked the shining lights and the sound of soft singing; the golden and multi-coloured glory of the mosaics on the walls, and the sweet scent of incense. He liked also his own dress of damask woven with metal threads, though it was heavy and uncomfortable. For it was fine to be a man and a prince and to wear a garment almost as splendid as those worn by father and mother.

Little mother need not hold his hand so tight. He was not afraid. But perhaps she was afraid, or perhaps even she wanted to keep his hair for herself and not give it all to God? . . .

Now the Bishop, in a wonderful robe of jewelled silk, was bending over him, and he felt the cold steel of the scissors clip-clipping his curls. That was rather terrible, but a man must not mind such things. And presently there were the large warm hands of the Bishop on his little shorn head and the holy blessing. He looked up afterwards and thought, "If God wants the hair of little boys, why does not He also want the Bishop's long hair and beard?"

Presently they were passing out of the cathedral. At the foot of the stone steps, servants were holding

ready a small gaily-caparisoned white horse. Boyars and people thronged the courtyard and broke into joyful shouts directly the royal family and the prelates appeared.

"Slava! Slava!" they shouted. "Glory be to the blessed little prince Alexander!"

Yaroslav caught the child up in his arms, ran with him down the steps and placed him in the saddle on the white horse. His stout little legs could hardly bestride it, but he felt that this was splendid. To sit up so high, to see those cheerful laughing faces all around, to clutch, as they were handed to him, a dagger in a sheath of silver and two real arrows, the arms of a warrior: this was worth any sacrifice of womanish curls.

Then with two boyars leading the horse and with Yaroslav walking beside to hold his son in the saddle, they went through the streets of Novgorod among the cheering populace back to the palace, where a great feast was prepared. Many guests were invited and all received lavish gifts: jewels, gold and silver goblets or fine raiment.

At this presentation Alexander did not assist. Early during the feast, he was discovered sleeping peacefully underneath the wall bench in the great central hall. In one chubby hand he still held an arrow, in the other he had a sugar stick, which he had evidently been sucking.

Although in solemn state he had undertaken the duty of a prince to protect his native land from foreign foes, he was as yet only three years old.

III

It was magnificent to be a man and to play warlike games with brother Fédor, who was equally the champion of his native land, but perhaps not quite such an enthusiastic champion. But it was not always easy for Alexander to understand, in his early years, who was the enemy. Novgorod was home and surely Novgorod was large and safe enough. Who would wish to attack them there?

"Beyond the river is the sea," said Fédor. "And the way to the sea used to be open, because the coast used to belong to the princedom of Polotsk, to Novgorod and to Pskov. Pskov is the younger brother of Novgorod. You are Pskov and I am Novgorod."

"I would rather be Novgorod," said Alexander.

"You cannot be Novgorod because you are the younger. Now our way to the sea is cut off by the Chud tribes and the Nemtsy, the Teutonic knights. And these are both enemies; the Chuds because they are pagans, and the knights because they are not of the Orthodox, but of the Latin Church."

"What are pagans?"

"Wicked people who worship devils."

"Do the knights worship devils too?"

"No, they worship God, as we do, and they try to convert the pagans. But the pagans hate them. So they kill each other in great numbers."

"Then why should we fight them?"

"Because when they are tired of killing each other, they want to kill us. The knights would like to make Russia Latin and enslaved, and to do that, they would turn the Chuds against us. This is what our tutor, Judge Joachim, told me. But our saintly father, the Bishop, said that it is not the Nemtsy who are to blame so much as the pagans, and that we must train ourselves to lead a crusade against them and bring them to the Orthodox Church."

"I feel sorry for the pagans," said Alexander. "Holy Writ says we are to love our enemies, and I would rather live at peace with the Chuds than with the Germans. I do not think the knights can worship God as we do. It is not honourable to convert people in order to use them in warfare, and it is not right to kill people when they do not want to be converted."

"You are too young to understand these matters," said Fédor. "It is always right to convert or to kill the heathen."

"The Latins may think that," said Alexander. "I think that the heathen must have good reason for hating them."

They had indeed. The wild Finnish inhabitants of the sea-coast had in the past often disputed among themselves, but Russia had had no cause to interfere. Then, early in the twelfth century, German merchants had visited their shores and had built a small fort on the Dvina river. There followed a monk called Meinhardt, who, receiving permission to preach in the Polotsk country, began first to

build churches and to convert the people to Christianity, but afterwards to build strongholds and encourage his converts to fight the neighbouring tribes. Other Latin monks, merchants and warriors gradually flocked here, and German commerce began to flourish in Livonia.

Suddenly the country rose in wild revolt. The lately baptised heathen flung their baptism back in the face of the Roman Catholic Church by washing themselves free of its power in the pagan waters of the Dvina.

"We are Rus," they cried, "and we will never be Latin."

They were slaughtered like sheep by the militant monks and, when they rose again, Rome formed against them in Livonia the force of Teutonic knights, known as Brothers of the Sword. The knights appeared as Crusaders, wearing white mantles marked with a red cross and carrying long sabres in red scabbards. Villages and settlements trembled at the approach of the Cross Bearers and the wretched people were systematically enslaved, killed, turned against one another or against Russia. In revenge, the tribesmen occasionally burned alive Danish and German soldiers as offerings to the old gods.

But nothing could stop the advance of the Church militant. With Teutonic thoroughness and from motives purely political and commercial, the Holy Roman Empire, for once united in purpose with the Holy Catholic Church, established its outpost in the Russian land and built at the mouth of the

river Rigje, tributary of the Dvina, a strong fortress, which afterwards became the city of Riga. The Orthodox Church meanwhile, preached its own crusade against the Chuds, whose conversion remained the main bone of contention between the two great forces of Christianity; the German intent on increasing its power, the Russian on maintaining its own.

And as, in the north, they faced each other thus like two angry dogs, no one heeded a cloud, not much larger than a man's hand, that was rising in the south. To the Orthodox Church it appeared in fact at first as a blessing rather than as a menace. The Polovtsi, those ancient enemies and uncertain allies of the steppes, begged the help of the Russian princes against a strange marauding tribe from the east and, that their plea might carry greater weight, the Polovtsi Khan acknowledged himself a Christian and a brother.

Mstislav the Gallant left Galicia and, joined by several other Russian princes, went forth to meet the new barbarians who, it was said, were Tartars of the race of Gog and Magog, originally enclosed behind the Great Wall and the Iron Gate of Derbend by Alexander of Macedon. They were a foul people, the Polovtsi reported, eaters of human flesh and themselves scarcely of the human race, for they had the snouts of dogs.

"O black crow Polovtsi," laughed Mstislav the Gallant, "though these Tartars be demons from hell, we will surely overcome them with ease by the power of the Holy Cross."

He spoke, and soon after received an envoy from the enemy. The Tartar embassy was not unlike the Polovtsi type, broad-shouldered, bow-legged, riding as born to the saddle, with short stirrups and loose rein, the small horse of the steppe land. But the Tartar face was swarthier, stronger and more intelligent, and the narrow Tartar eyes, with their sloping lids, were bright as the eyes of a bird.

The message brought from the Tartar commanders, referring no doubt to some remote nomad chieftain, was however insufferable.

"We, Subotai the Valiant and Chébé Noyan, are the victorious captains of Chingiz, the Very Mighty, Khan of all the Mongols, to whom Heaven has given the conquest of the world. We have hunted to his death the Shah of the Kwaresmian Empire, which remains in the hands of Chingiz. We have ravaged Armenia and Georgia and have scattered the tribes on your frontier like chaff before the wind. Now we are gorged with triumph. Therefore yield to us, O Rus, and our terms will be easy. If you yield not, who knows what will happen? Heaven alone knows!"

Such pretension, such insolence, deserved no answer.

"Let the lying dogs first taste the cup of death," said the Russian princes unanimously.

And the Mongol envoy was duly executed.

There followed certain insignificant skirmishes favourable to the Russians, between the outposts of either side. Then Mstislav led his army to the

bank of the Kalka river that flows into the Sea of Azov. On the opposite bank the forces of Subotai the Valiant and Chébé Noyan were terribly arrayed. There were vast numbers of horsemen, stronger than any nomad band that had ever appeared in the steppes. There were innumerable wagons and herds of cattle. And at their head was carried a banner hung with yaks' tails and surmounted horribly with two crossed bones, making the sacred sign to which Mstislav the Gallant pinned his faith.

§

While princes make wars, small folk have their own troubles, boyars may suffer private sorrows, and even good animals may not escape. So it was, according to the old legend, in the case of Dobrynya Nikitich, called by his friends Gold-belt, and his affianced brother Alyosha, not to mention his faithful horse named Self-flier. But who, with any sense, would grieve for a woman? Not Self-flier, who cared for his master. And not, in the end, Dobrynya or Alyosha, who only cared for each other.

When Dobrynya returned from Constantinople to his native city of Ryazan, no one at first knew him, for his absence had been long. But at last, in the street, an old comrade recognised him, or his horse Self-flier, and caught the bridle and said: "Go not yet to your own dvor, Gold-belt, go not yet! Come home with me to my dvor and while we sup, I will tell you all the news."

"God bless you, friend," said Gold-belt. "I

must first embrace my little wife. And when I have embraced her, I must seek out and embrace my affianced brother, Alyosha; he to whom I have been bound since childhood in great love. When I have embraced these two, then surely I will come to your dvor and we will feast and sing together."

The old comrade tugged at the bridle, till Self-flier shook his head and pawed the ground.

"Come aside, Gold-belt, and listen. We all believed you dead. Now be strong, Gold-belt, and weep not. I swear to God, you were not expected back. Alyosha went in to comfort your lady. Your dear ones consoled each other. They are married."

Dobrynya dismounted and said: "It is not true. She could not forget me. We loved each other well. . . . Alyosha, my brother, would never betray me."

"Alas, Gold-belt, if you doubt me, come first to my dvor. There I will disguise you as a strolling player. And you shall leave your horse, Self-flier, and you shall take a guzli and then you shall go to your own dvor, playing soft and secretly, and, I swear to God, you shall see the truth."

Dobrynya went with his friend and he hid his stalwart young figure under an old mantle and his yellow hair under a cloth hood. But his face he did not alter, for no one now would have seen in it the morning glory of his youth. No one now would have recognised him, except Self-flier (or perhaps a woman), who knew him by his gentle voice and his gentle hands. Then Dobrynya took a seven-stringed harp, a guzli, and he wandered out through

the streets of Ryazan, softly playing and secretly singing:

"Fair and round are the golden domes
Of cities across the darkling waters,
Darkling deep are the water homes
Of river gods and their naiad daughters.
Warm and bright for a man's delight
Is the house where the quiet dove sits cooing,
But the quiet dove and her mate take fright
When a ghost appears to their undoing."

He came to his own dvor and, from the courtyard, he looked through a window into the house-place. And there was Alyosha, his affianced brother, sitting by the stove, and there was his little wife sitting on Alyosha's knee.

Then Dobrynya struck his guzli and sang again:

"When a ghost appears, he is not dead,
He is not cold, nor laid to rest,
He burns with a raging flame instead,
To put his darlings to the test."

"There is a wandering minstrel at the window," said Alyosha. "Let us have him in."

And they had him in and did not know him and gave him a cup of mead.

Dobrynya said: "I will sing you another song.

"With women the hair is long
And the memory short;
With brothers the bond is strong
And the absence naught.
If the sacred bond is burst,
You are both accurst!"

They started up. The little wife screamed: "It is he. It is Dobrynya. Mother of God, have mercy!"

Alyosha said nothing. He was dark, as Dobrynya was fair, but now his was like the face of a dead man and Dobrynya's face was red.

"False wife and false brother, I want neither of you," cried Dobrynya, and made towards the door.

Alyosha was there before him.

"I go," he said. "Since you live, this is your place."

He went, and there was a sound at the window.

Meanwhile, Self-flier, left behind in the courtyard of Dobrynya's friend, had thought: "The ways of human beings are remarkable. At this time of night, after a long journey, my good master should know the need of water, oats and bedding. Yet, misled by others, he wanders about making noises with his mouth that have no meaning. I will follow him."

Within the house-place, the little wife wailed: "Forgive, O forgive; we did not know!"

Dobrynya opened the window and saw Self-flier.

"Here is one who knows me better," he said.

And he climbed out through the window, without another glance at the little wife, and mounted Self-flier and rode away.

Now Dobrynya was young and valiant. Already in his far travels, as the ballad tells, he had killed a dreadful dragon in the river Puchai, and perhaps, in those same far travels, he had met and loved other ladies besides the little wife whom he had left at

Ryazan. But never had he loved any other man besides Alyosha, for a man may not have more than one affianced brother and, as among the tribesmen of the steppes, this bond, sanctified by blood-letting, is the strongest bond on earth. Therefore the separation between Dobrynya and Alyosha was hard to bear and, since Dobrynya's heart was like lead, the horse Self-flier had also to carry a heavy burden.

Dobrynya and Alyosha left the city of Ryazan in different directions and both adventured forth into the world. But presently both went southwards, and in time it happened that both joined the forces of the Russian princes, arrayed against the Tartars, on the bank of the river Kalka. Neither knew that the other was there, for it chanced that they did not meet face to face in that great concourse of warriors.

Also it happened, when Mstislav saw the sign of the Holy Cross so blasphemously set up against him by the pagans, such rage possessed him that he would not allow the battle to be delayed, even for the expected arrival of reinforcements from Kiev. Swiftly at night, he transported his own men and the Polovtsi legions across the river and attacked the Tartar camp.

Then at last, Dobrynya and Alyosha were riding side by side through the darkness and the turmoil, wielding their battle-axes and calling on the saints. And though they could not see each other and their faces were hidden by veils of woven mail, each

knew the other's voice and each was aware of the other's presence.

"Holy Saint Vladimir, be with us!" shouted Dobrynya. "And send my false brother Alyosha the fate that he deserves!"

"Blessed Saint Olga, lead us!" yelled Alyosha. "And grant that my perfidious brother Gold-belt, who should have died long since, may do so to-day!"

But the horse, Self-flier, thought: "This is excellent. We are on our way to slay another dragon, and I may be able to help my good master, as I did before."

The Tartars could not be taken by surprise. With great precision, they retreated in close formation, from which they made encircling movements, shooting a hail of arrows into the mass of their attackers. Suddenly the Polovtsi, seized with panic, stampeded, carrying disorder through the Russian ranks. The Tartars turned in solid force and overwhelmed them.

The ford of the Kalka river was choked with the fallen bodies of men and horses.

Self-flier thought: "The ways of human beings are past understanding. There is no dragon after all. What, then, is it all about?" On the western bank of the stream, he stumbled, sobbed and sank down with blood pouring from his neck. "It appears to be about nothing," thought Self-flier with glazing eyes.

Dobrynya pitched forward over his horse's head and knew his own back broken, as he was crushed

into the mud by flying feet. But he was not yet dead.

When morning dawned, he was aware that a man's face, lying close to his own, had a familiar aspect. It was the face of Alyosha, young and beautiful as when they had first loved each other. The helmet had fallen from Alyosha's dark head, and Alyosha was gazing at him out of his dark eyes.

"Well, well," muttered Dobrynya, "you see, I am still alive."

"Well, well, so am I," whispered Alyosha. "But neither of us will get back to Ryazan. So you need never have given so much trouble by turning up there."

"It was a mistake," said Dobrynya. "Do not remember evil against me, brother."

"The fault was mine, brother," said Alyosha. "But I pray you, do not remember it either."

Dobrynya smiled. As he died, he felt the lips of Alyosha on his cheek.

§

The rout of the Russian army by the Tartars was complete and fearful. And, though the reinforcements from Kiev tried bravely to withstand the pagans in a fortified palisade on the shore of the river, their end was even worse than the end of those who had perished sooner. Yet, after their victory, the Tartars vanished again into the wide steppes. Their invasion had been a cloud on the horizon, a little black cloud, no larger than a man's hand.

IV

MSTISLAV the Gallant did not long outlive the battle of the Kalka. He felt that his defeat there had been the just punishment of the Almighty for his usurpation of Galicia from his son-in-law, Daniel. Now he sought sadly to make amends to Daniel. But it was too late for any diplomacy. Civil war broke out again among all the southern princes and, while they attacked one another by turns, the ambition of various boyars fomented existing trouble and perpetually re-created it.

After the death of Mstislav, never was there such a time of turmoil. Prince Daniel had no abiding place and battles raged throughout the district of the river Dnieper, in Volynia and Galitch, at Chernigov and at Kiev.

The ancient glory had departed from Kiev when Vladimir became the chief capital, and Kiev had more than once been pillaged by marauding bands. But Kiev was still a rich and splendid place, with her four hundred golden-domed churches, ornamented with mosaics and frescoes from Byzantium, and her eight markets, filled with slaves and corn-stacks and honey. The houses of her rich merchants were magnificent and her culture in art and literature was supreme. As a great trading community she was second only to Novgorod, but, since her trade was mainly based on slavery, serfdom was gradually driving her free citizens to the north and causing her decay.

Now once again her palaces were sacked, fires smouldered in her courtyards, and corpses lay in her streets.

And through those streets there strode, on a day, a strange stalwart figure, dressed in a rough woollen robe girdled with iron chains. His head and feet were bare, his beard was long, dark and unkempt, and his pale emaciated face was lit with an unearthly light. As he went, he cried from time to time, in a loud voice: "The fury of the Lord, preparing on high, will come upon us. Soon—soon the signs shall appear in the heavens. . . . Repent, repent, for the hour of tribulation is at hand!"

He was followed at a respectful distance by loiterers and children and, as he passed, women in the poorer quarters of the city ran out from their dwelling-places and pressed upon him humble offerings of rye bread and cheese, beseeching his blessing.

"He is God's Fool," said one to the other. "He has the higher wisdom. He is born of the grey earth and of the Holy Power. Hinder him not, for he knows what will come to pass."

"He foretells greater trouble for Kiev! Aïe; how should greater trouble come upon us?"

"Repent, repent," cried the terrible voice. "There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, and of this city there shall not remain one stone upon another. For the patience of the Lord waxeth old as a garment and the powers of darkness will be loosed to ravage the land."

He passed in the midst of prayers and supplica-

tions, and the terror-stricken people, to whom then and thereafter the fanatical prophet was no stranger, questioned each other, saying:

"Whence is this menace? From among the princes? From the west, or from the north? Or from the nomads of the steppes?"

§

Meanwhile, in the far free city of Novgorod the childhood of Prince Alexander passed in blissful unconsciousness of any mysterious menace. Yaroslav and Feodosia had now several sons. Fédor was the eldest and, next to Alexander, came Andrei and three others, of whom the last born was a stout and truculent infant called Michael. Yet of the six, Alexander remained the favourite, not only of his parents, but of all people. His bright and sunny nature, his good looks and a quality of independence and courage marked him as born to command and, like all good democrats, the Novgorodians loved a strong man.

"Here is he who will protect our shores and our city from Chuds or Latins when the time comes," they said. "Blessed be our young Alexander, born to greatness and power."

In his training there was no abuse of this high destiny. Yaroslav, his old fire of ambition now completely quelled by residence in Novgorod and family life, insisted no less than Feodosia, now satisfied with her children, that only the most rigorous religious and technical education was fit for princes.

From their earliest years, all the boys were not only taught to read and write, but the chief aim set before them was a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures, and their teachers were invariably ecclesiastics. Alexander was always the most intelligent and inquiring and, to him especially, was explanation offered.

"Your soul, my son, is created by the breath of God and is the reflection of God Himself. There are three powers. First the highest wisdom, which distinguishes us from animals and prevents the sin of pride. Second sense, by which we work with zeal and are prevented from jealousy. Third the will, by which we suffer for righteousness' sake. Ever remember, O my son, these three rules."

"I will remember," said Alexander, "to be wise, to be zealous, and to be brave."

"Now, my son, repeat the third psalm, for in that you will learn all that a prince should be."

And Alexander would chant mournfully:

> "Lord, how are they increased that trouble me.
> Many are they that rise against me."

But when he reached the last verse but one, he clenched his hands and intoned with vehemence:

> "Up, Lord, and help me, O my God!
> For thou smitest all mine enemies upon the cheek-bone.
> Thou hast broken the teeth of the ungodly!"

Whereupon his good teacher would murmur:

"Gently, gently, my son. The time has not yet come when you should glory in that verse."

"I should have loved holy King David, the Psalmist," said Alexander, "for he was a warrior as I will be."

"Consider rather his meekness, O my son."

"I will try," said Alexander, "but I like the fighting songs best."

"To be strong, you must submit; to conquer, you must yield. This is the greater courage and this the truth."

So Alexander learned discipline and self-control. He studied and prayed, he fasted and did penance, he visited shrines and held vigil as a knight. And the strange result of this conventional education was not to narrow but to broaden his mind, not to stultify but to increase his growth.

As the fearless soldier is ultimately produced by long and apparently meaningless drill, so Alexander's character was formed by orthodox rites. He waded through the works of Grigorii the Theologian, of Kyrill of Alexandria, and of Saint Chrysostomes. He was taught much Greek and a little Latin to gain respect for foreigners. He pored over the Chronicles of his own country, and wrestled with the Russian grammar.

And when the head ached and the eyes burned from long study, there was the more thrilling education day by day in all manly exercises: riding half-broken horses, shooting with the bow and arrow, wielding the battle-axe and throwing the spear. Then for relaxation, there was always sport, nowhere more glorious than in the neighbourhood of Novgorod.

On an early spring morning, as dawn first touched the domes of Saint Sophia with rosy light, hunters and courtiers gathered in the great courtyard of the royal palace. The city was already awake. Novgorod was stirring throughout its streets to see the gay cavalcade go by.

Alexander and his brothers rode out on Arab horses decked with rich trappings. Slaves ran by their side carrying iron-tipped pikes and other implements of the chase and changes of clothing. Others led wolfhounds and borzois in leash and the falconers followed, bearing hooded hawks on their wrists.

Through the frosty air the horns sounded sharp and sweet. There was a babel of voices, a rush of feet, the creak of leather, the jingle of bells. O, it was good to be alive!

"You will be a great sportsman, prince," said an old boyar to Alexander, "like your ancestor, Vladimir Monomach, before you."

"Did he follow the chase often?"

"God save him, he did. But he said of it himself, that it was hard work. Twice he and his horse were tossed by bison; once he was gored by a stag and once he was trampled by an elk."

"The saints must have watched over him."

"They did. He had not a whole bone left in his body. A wild boar tore the sword from his hip and a bear bit through his saddle near the knee. It is all written in the Chronicles. And withal he was a modest man. He never boasted of his own

prowess and valour, but always gave thanks to God."

"He must have loved the wild, as I do. And perfect love casts out fear. I sometimes think we are never so near Heaven as when we are happy and free. But is it not strange, Roman Danilovich, that we are aware of merciful salvation when we go out to destroy in merciliess mood?"

"It is the comradeship of sport," said the old boyar gruffly. "We are at one, not only with our fellows, but with our prey, for we may also be the prey. And that fellowship is the law of Christ, without which Nature remains red in tooth and claw."

"Do you believe what is told, that our Lord Christ sometimes comes to wander visibly through the Russian land, Roman Danilovich?"

"Certainly, my prince. But only the most blessed may behold Him."

"Assuredly. Perhaps He appears even to the wild beasts and to the birds, for they, in their innocence, are more worthy than we. And though it is said that they have no immortal souls, I think He must have known and loved them well, when He lived in the wilderness as a man."

"Bold words, that priests would hardly approve, prince. But I approve. You have the wisdom of youth and what is more, courage, which I hold a holy quality. In the Kingdom of Heaven the first are last and the last first. Ay, I think with you that the wolf may crouch at the Saviour's feet and the hare may lie in His arms and the woodpecker

may nestle in His breast. And the good horse and the faithful hound may follow after Him, while men stay waiting by their shrines. For all these are pure in heart and only the pure in heart may see God."

Thus was Alexander trained, in ways orthodox and also unorthodox. And in spite of the divergence of these ways, both were sincere enough to lead him on the same road of truth.

§

Brother Fédor, sickly from his childhood, fell ill of a fever and died. Then Yaroslav, his father, felt it his mission to leave Feodosia and his other sons at Novgorod and to carry peace southward to distracted Kiev.

The beauty of Yaroslav had faded with years and domesticity. His pale face had become rather round and to it was added a fair silky beard which lent it a kind of prim dignity. Yet the narrow grey eyes still held a look of tragic youth, as though they alone retained the secret of Yaroslav's life and death. He had married Feodosia for ambition; then he had loved and lost her. But ever since she had returned and conquered him, he had rather feared her. His empty heart had been given wholly to Alexander.

Now all his family and servants were gathered together in one room for the ceremony of farewell. He sat with them in silence for a few moments. Then he rose and, passing from one to the other,

kissed each member of the household three times on the cheeks and marked each head, chest and shoulders with the sign of the cross.

After this, he deputed Alexander to reign in his stead at Novgorod.

"There is no doubt that you will be elected in the Véché," he said. "The people love you better than they have ever loved me. The Holy Cross will be your protector, your helper and your guardian, and your sword will be your menace."

"I shall strive to remember all your counsels, O my father. Only that I may be fortified in my great task, tell me when you will return to us or when we may rejoin you."

"The future is in God's hands," said Yaroslav. "If He grant it, we shall be reunited. But something tells me that when that time comes, it will not last for long. We may be together for some great occasion, but this is the real parting. This is the end of your childhood, though perchance it is not the end of my care for you. Yet, if I cannot shield you further, little Alexander, son of my heart, remember this: your country is your father and your mother, dearer to you from henceforth than any parent. Consecrate yourself to that service!"

Dim and mysterious words! Nothing was certain but the sanctity of a land one was pledged to defend, a land torn by dissension within, threatened by shadows without; a most dear land in the wilds of which Christ sometimes walked, visible to the pure in heart. . . .

But Yaroslav was sorely troubled. Before the formal leave-taking, he had visited Feodosia alone, where she sat apart in an inner room. He had found her embroidering a garment for Alexander with bright-coloured silks. She had looked young, fair and happy, as though she knew no anxiety, and he had felt resentment of her aspect, for surely she should have been on her knees, praying for Russia and for him.

He had asked her to remember this duty during his absence and she had answered: "I shall not forget it, Yaroslav. But I shall pray with confidence in your safe return and not with agony, as I prayed once, when I knew that you did not love me as I loved you."

"How can you say that?" he had replied, ill at ease with her frankness. "Have not I given you Alexander, besides many other fair sons?"

"Alexander was born of my tears and was sent as an angel from Heaven for my consolation," she had said. "Though you are verily his father, Yaroslav, he has no resemblance to you. He is strong where you are weak. He will ever be a champion among warriors and he will not fail to understand that Novgorod must be conquered to be kept."

As usual, she had alarmed him, had rendered him speechless and impotent. Their parting embrace was perfunctory. He went, carrying to Kiev a sacred relic encased in a gilded wooden model of Saint Sophia and feeling that women were harder to understand than saints.

When the time came to find a bride for Alexander, a temperament more conventional than that of his mother would, he considered, be the happiest choice.

§

Alexander went to be crowned prince of Novgorod in the great cathedral.

It was an awful and solemn hour. He was scarcely conscious of the seething crowd without the building or of the great and glorious company who were present within. He saw the soft radiance of innumerable wax candles, which penetrated the furthest shadows of the aisles and was reflected from iridescent mosaics on the walls. He heard the chanting of the choir, like a celestial song, and the pungent odour of clouds of incense transported his senses.

Never had he felt at once so virile and so weak. All his world was looking to him to guide it, to guard it and to do its will. And the living alone were not giving him this fearful responsibility. The dead also were here—his ancestors, buried beneath the stones of Holy Sophia. They came near him in turn, urging him to duty and service. Saint and adventurer, Norseman and Greek, they gathered round him and spoke words of counsel to his soul.

"Be wise, Alexander Yaroslavovich, for only in wisdom may power be held and patience gained."

"Be zealous for the faith of your fathers, Alexander Yaroslavovich, for without that faith there is no life eternal."

"Be brave, Alexander Yaroslavovich, for courage is the Holy Spirit, the gift of God, the Comforter."

He was barely eighteen years old at this time. They said of him at Novgorod that he was comely as Joseph the beautiful, strong as Samson, learned as Solomon.

He was, in fact, a splendid young knight, at the threshold of a great career. And, like all exceptional and sensitive characters, he was at this moment afraid. What, if after all, he should fail in judgment to satisfy Great Lord Novgorod? What if zeal for his country should carry him to commit cruelty against the misled pagan Chuds of the frontier? What if courage deserted him in battle or in diplomacy, and how should he choose between two different kinds of courage, the physical and the spiritual?

The bishop laid his hands on Alexander's head, with a curious reminder of early days, when cold scissors went snip-snip, shearing off three-year-old yellow curls. It was no moment to think of that. "O God, how can a man prevail when he cannot even control his thoughts!"

. . . "And may the King of Kings give to thee, His humble slave, the power to be just. May He strengthen thee on the altar of truth and defend thee by His Holy Spirit. May He make thee, His slave, manifest thyself a valiant defender of the Holy Church and thus render thee deserving of the Heavenly Kingdom. Amen."

Alexander lifted his eyes. Far above from the

eastern dome a Face looked down upon him, majestic and serene. In that Face was all compassion, all sympathy, all love. Where that Face appeared, the wolf of the forest would crouch and the hare lie still and the little woodpecker nestle close, while the good horse and the faithful hound followed after. And the soul of Holy Russia, the soul of the grey earth and of the wide dark rivers, would acknowledge its King.

"Not mine is the strength, Lord Christ, nor mine the power. Use me as Thine instrument, to do Thy will and so shall I be blessed."

He went out to the joyful shouts of the multitude. "Alexander, Alexander, you are our prince!"

And as he scattered largesse among the people, all wondered to see so lofty and fearless a mien in one so young, and all admired the sonorous and self-possessed voice with which he addressed them. It appeared that he had not a care in the world and that he was conscious of complete mastery. Here, indeed, was a man to trust and to follow.

V

PRINCE ALEXANDER of Novgorod had need of his people's faith. For already those terrible signs and portents foretold by the prophet of Kiev (he who was known as God's Fool) were come upon the whole land and were troubling all minds.

None could tell the meaning of unparalleled dry seasons, which followed each other during a course of years, causing smoke to rise from the swamps and fires to break out in the forests and birds to fall down dead. The summer days were weighted with a hazy, breathless heat and, in the autumn sky at night, there appeared a great comet, the shining tail of which extended like a lance outstretched from west to east.

Then earthquakes were reported from the south and floods from the north. The sun was darkened by an eclipse and, when the eclipse had passed, the sun alternately took the form of a monstrous crimson ball and of a small pale wraith.

Finally from Novgorod pillars of light of all colours, green, blue, purple and orange, could be seen shooting across the darkened heavens. And though the people must often have beheld the Aurora Borealis, never before had its glory seemed to them so full of menace.

Kiev itself was even more sorely tried. Yaroslav sent messages to say that fiery clouds were brooding over that city and constantly increasing in the fury

of their colour and size. So dreadful was the apparition that the priests carried the sacred relics through the streets of the city and the people fell on their knees and prayed and wept aloud. All believed that the end of the world was at hand, and that God was about to descend in flaming wrath to deliver judgment. But as they prayed, the fires of heaven fell into the river Dnieper and were quenched. The merciful saints and Mother Nepra had prevailed to deliver Kiev.

The result of trouble in southern wheat-growing lands was famine at Novgorod. So serious did this become that the Princess Feodosia and the younger princes left the place and went to Pereyaslavl Beyond the Forest. But Alexander stayed in his native city to superintend the grants of corn from the royal granaries.

Terrible rumours of misery in the poorer quarters of the town reached him in his palace through the Véché and wrung his heart. It was even whispered that the bodies of those who died of hunger were devoured by others driven to madness by the fear of a like fate. In the commercial quarter, on the east bank of the Volkhov, among warehouses and izbas,[1] pestilence broke out.

Directly Alexander heard this, he went there to comfort his people. He was incapable of fear, he had no thought of self. Like one of the Greek gods or heroes of old, with his bright blue eyes, his classic features and his lithe figure, he rode

[1] Huts or tenements.

out from his palace and, for very love and shame, a band of boyars followed him.

They crossed a bridge from the spacious and comparatively affluent Side of Saint Sophia and came into meaner streets, deep in dust and smelling of decay. Word went before them of the prince's presence, and the poor houses disgorged their inhabitants like opened sacks from which rats run out. Here were peasants, beggars, male and female slaves of many nationalities, the blind, the halt, the diseased and those on whom famine had set its mark. Here were the dregs of the city mob. They flocked around Alexander, wailing and beseeching, and he addressed them in his sonorous young voice, assuring them of his pity. Then his druzhina distributed bread, meat and money among them, while he, remaining on horseback, watched the distribution.

A Russian maiden, with loose red hair, wearing a tattered dress of yellow stuff, gazed at him from the doorway of a house. Her arms were folded across her shapely bosom, and her pinched, elfin face was alight with purpose which gave her a wild beauty. It was easier to imagine her sullen or enraged, but now she was on fire with admiration of the princely figure on his white Arab. Suddenly she darted forward, thrust aside an old woman, who was wrapping a loaf in an outspread kerchief, ducked under the arm of a gesticulating man and came to her goal at Alexander's knee.

"My lord prince! One word with you. This is free Novgorod. Therefore even I may speak."

He smiled at her. "Speak on, sister."

Her age was perhaps fifteen, four years younger than himself, but he felt at once that she was older in wisdom than he.

"Is it true what they say, that our Russian land will be invaded by a great enemy?"

"It may be true. If it be true, I am pledged to defend the Russian land."

"You will never allow the enemy to come to Great Lord Novgorod?"

"God helping me, I will never allow it."

"Then are we secure, for God is with you. Yet hear me, my lord; I will not starve and I will not fall sick of the pestilence. But I will be free to rejoice with you in that day when you have delivered Novgorod."

She laughed up into his face. She seized his stirrup leather and kissed it. Next moment she was gone. He had given her nothing but his promise.

A citizen standing near volunteered excuses and explanations.

"For the love of Christ, forgive the poor wench, my lord. She is only Vassilissa Ivanovna, the drunken blacksmith's slave, and what with hunger and ill-treatment, perhaps she has not all her wits. Therefore God's blessing may be upon her. . . ."

"She is a fair child," said Alexander. "See to it that she is found and helped."

Many women had already looked on him with eyes of love, but he had never heeded their beguilements, nor had he ever beheld such devotion in any other eyes.

"Some day," he thought now, "a marriage will be arranged for me and perhaps my bride will gaze on me thus. How wonderful that will be!"

§

Suddenly, in the winter following the time of pestilence, the storm broke on Russia. From the east and not from the west it came, unexpectedly, ruinously.

No one knew the enemy. For though they had come with terror, thirteen years before, to the river Kalka in the south, the shadow of that terror had been no more than a small cloud.

But now, men remembered a prophecy of old, concerning the pagan Tartars. "They will come before time ends," was the saying, "and they will capture all places."

The powers of darkness were loosed. They were bursting into Holy Russia from the Trans-Volga regions, beyond the eastern frontier; they were spreading like a flood across those steppes that were known later as the district of Saratof.

An enormous army of horsemen, led by their chieftain, one Batu Khan, advanced rapidly on the city of Ryazan. That place received the enemy envoys, who were led in by an old witch-woman of the Kipchak tribe. She had already betrayed

her people and their chief, Batzinak, to the Tartars. She had sold her soul to the devil and was honoured by the devil's spawn.

The message delivered to Ryazan said: "In token of submission, give one-tenth of everything, one prince in ten, one man in ten of common people, every tenth one from black, white, brown and pied horses; from every kind of beast one out of ten; of all wealth and produce the tenth part. For this is the law of Batu Khan, the invincible, the conqueror."

Russian princes met and consulted together.

"When no one of us is living," they sent back answer, "what is left will belong to you."

And thereupon they made ready to march out and give battle. The witch-woman and her attendants rode away from the walls of Ryazan. Like a man she rode, astride the saddle, and, as she went, a warrior on the wall hurled a javelin after her and pierced her through the back.

But before she fell, she plucked the weapon out and brandished it and cried in a dreadful voice: "You shall see, you shall see, how the Mongols will drive in the pig and stick him in the city."

The Russian sortie was utterly crushed. Then Ryazan heard that the surrounding country had been reduced to desert. Smaller towns and villages had been burned to the ground and vultures were devouring the corpses that lay in the snow-covered grass lands. A few survivors reached the city, but more were flying to hide in the forests.

Nothing could stop the enemy's onslaught. They erected a great wall, strengthened with palisades and surmounted with siege engines. They drove in the refugees before them as beaters drive game and, when their victims were enclosed, they hurled against them the strength of their countless numbers.

When Ryazan fell, it was delivered over to slaughter and pillage. As a place, it ceased to exist, and the principality to which it gave its name shared its fate.

Yet still the muzhiki resisted in defence of their land. Till in the whole of that neighbourhood, only five captives survived and even the Tartars wondered at their heroism, saying:

"These Rus know well how to drink the death cup with their princes!"

The road from Ryazan to the capital city of Vladimir now lay open to the enemy, through the small town of Moscow, surrounded by comparatively rich and settled country. But Vladimir would surely be strong enough to resist, even if Moscow were taken.

Prince Yuri, the brother of Yaroslav and uncle of Alexander, sent a strong body of troops to Moscow, under his eldest son, left his wife and the rest of his family at Vladimir, and himself hastened northward to levy warriors. Yaroslav was expected from Kiev with reinforcements. But before he could come, Moscow was stormed, sacked and burned, the young prince in command there was taken prisoner and others were tortured to death.

The Mongol army then opened out like a fan, the fan of death, winnowing all before it. While the flanks took their own directions, the centre moved straight on to Vladimir, carrying with it Yuri's son as a hostage. In all that blackened, frozen, frightful country, he was one of the few Russians left alive. The rest were lurking like wild beasts in caves and woods.

Within two months of the invasion, the Mongols surrounded Vladimir. Their mounted commanders approached the main gate of the city, displayed their prisoner and asked: "Is Prince Yuri among you?"

From the walls they were answered with arrows, and straightway the hostage was slain and a hail of arrows was aimed back at the golden church domes of the city.

The Bishop of Vladimir counselled all his people to prepare for martyrdom. Many, both men and women, took monastic vows at once and everyone swarmed to defend the walls. It was useless. The Mongols raised a great embankment, traces of which still remain and, from its summit, leapt into the place and captured it.

Here, as elsewhere, every Russian died fighting for the holy Orthodox faith. The Bishop, Yuri's princess, her remaining children and many people took refuge in the cathedral. The smoke and flames of the burning city reached the sanctuary and they mounted to the galleries.

The Mongols forced the doors, rushed in and

sacked every shrine. Then they brought sticks and brushwood and built a mighty fire on the marble pavement. The smoke rose in columns to the galleries, and, through the noise and darkness, the voice of the Bishop could be heard praying: "O Lord, stretch Thine unseen hands to us and receive our souls."

When the Mongols burst into the galleries, they found the people kneeling to receive death as a sacrament.

And the merciful Hands in which they believed were strong enough not only to bring them to Paradise, but to uphold the walls of that sacred edifice, even to this day, as a memorial of their sacrifice.

Yet still the enemy went on. They pursued Yuri northward and soon Yuri lay dead in a pile of corpses, his head severed from his body.

Nothing could stop the Mongol advance. They were like a swarm of locusts, destroying every living thing before them, and they boasted that no grass grew in their wake.

The whole principality of Vladimir was ravaged. The cities of Rostov, Suzdal and Tver fell, and the town of Pereyaslavl Beyond the Forest, from which Feodosia and her children had long since fled back to Novgorod, was in the hands of the Tartars.

§

What hope remained for Novgorod? The snow-covered, frozen marshes offered a fair galloping

ground for the terrible horsemen. White and hard and shining, they lay ready to be trampled into foulness by countless feet. The wind blew from the north-east and, except for its sound, a deathly silence reigned. But in the city, the church bells tolled from morning till night, and the prayers of the people rose to God like incense continually burning.

It was easy to be zealous, and on fire with indignation against the enemy. It was not difficult to be brave and contemplate leading out a forlorn hope of attack. But, knowing the fate of other such enterprises, it was not easy to be wise.

The Véché was in a turmoil. There were some who counselled the evacuation of the city. There were others who wanted the Kremlin to be refortified; all who could be armed to take refuge within it and all useless mouths to be driven out into the surrounding country to perish. The prince would have to agree with whatever the Véché decided. And the Véché was incapable of any decision.

"O Lord Christ," prayed Alexander in the cathedral of Holy Sophia, "rule Thou Novgorod and protect it. For only in Thy power is any strength or any deliverance."

He came out serene and self-possessed, so that it was said: "Surely our prince is a strong man, and we can trust him. He has some plan for our safety and in his own time he will reveal it. Till then, we must wait."

On a night, the wind veered to the west and

thick clouds gathered over the sky. Next day the rain began to fall heavily. Never had there been so sudden a thaw and so surprising a change of temperature. In twenty-four hours the snow had vanished from the city streets and they were deep in liquid mud. The river Volkhov became a swollen torrent of melted ice. The cellars of houses were flooded and the courtyards were like bogs.

The whole world seemed wrapped in a sodden blanket of cloud. Alternately the west wind rose and fell. When the first rain-clouds were emptied, it blew forward others to take their place, and while they burst, letting fall their contents in straight almost solid rods, the wind died. As the discomfort of the citizens increased, their spirits rose.

"The outlying country must be impassable—one vast swamp. So long as it stands with rain, we are saved. Thanks be to God, Who has sent this weather."

It stood with rain. Throughout the country, like an army of spearmen, strong to defend Novgorod, the waters of sky and earth mingled. Like innumerable steel lances hurled out of heaven, the downpour continued. On the ground, gulleys became deep rushing streams and hollows became dark lakes. Anyone venturing into that land would have been lost and drowned. Beyond the city gates all was darkness and desolation and there was no sound but a steady liquid sighing.

Would the forces of Nature stop the Mongols?

Was God stronger than the devil?

There was no news now. Novgorod was cut off from any outer intelligence and could only wait and see whether this isolation meant immunity.

For many days there was none to tell that the enemy came on through storm and rain, with that dogged persistence and that iron discipline which characterised all their movements. Novgorod was their goal. They had never yet been prevented from attaining any goal. Men and horses floundered through the mud, sank into it and vanished. They had no rest or sleep. The dried mare's milk, which was their staple diet on campaign, became mildewed and uneatable. They died like drowned flies.

In the midst of that dreary waste, where no road was visible, they came to a solitary monolith of stone, discernible through the streaming rain as having the rude shape of a cross. Beyond was nothing but a bronze-coloured expanse of water.

"Ha! Here is a landmark. Now we may know our whereabouts."

Prisoners were summoned before the commanders and questioned.

"Ay, this is Ignat's Cross, built in the old time."

"How far to Novgorod?"

"A few verstas only. It does not matter."

"Why does not it matter?"

"Because you cannot pass Ignat's Cross."

It was true. There was no way on or round for mounted troops and siege engines.

The Mongols retired.

Novgorod and northern Russia were saved.

In the cathedral of Holy Sophia, while the rain beat on its golden domes, the choir chanted:

"I did call upon the Lord with my voice
And he heard me out of His holy hill.
I laid me down and slept and rose up again,
For the Lord sustained me. . . .
Thou smitest all mine enemies upon the cheek-bone,
Thou hast broken the teeth of the ungodly.
Salvation belongeth unto the Lord. . . ."

VI

A TIDAL wave recedes, leaving the abomination of desolation in empty mud-flats that once were fertile lands. So did the Mongols, when they retreated south-eastward over many hundreds of miles to the delta of the river Volga.

On this shore, they established their base in a great encampment and presently began to build, on the salty plain, Batu's imperial residence which was to be called Sarai. For Batu Khan meant here to be the founder of a new and splendid dynasty, the dynasty of the Golden Horde, so named because he claimed connection with the ancient Manchurian tribe of the Niu-tchi, original founders of the Kin or Golden dynasty of northern China.

Ogotai, the Grand Khan of Mongolia, was even now continuing the conquest of northern China, begun by his father Chingiz. And Batu intended to establish meanwhile, in eastern Europe, an empire greater than that of the Kins.

Therefore, his capital, Sarai, was to be a splendid city, complete with markets and bath-houses, handsome, populous and so large in extent that to ride through it would be half a day's journey. Finally, it would contain his magnificent palace, surrounded with walls and flanked with towers.

The work, entrusted to captives of various nationalities—Kipchaks, Circassians, Bulgars and Russians—proceeded quickly, while, from its base, the Mongol

army made ravaging expeditions northwards. But it did not venture again as far as Novgorod, partly perhaps from superstitious fear, but partly also because Novgorod was considered subject to the ruined province of Vladimir.

Calamity had paralysed the Russian people, who were now incapable of any self-defensive effort. Through forests, where refugees still lingered, the whisper went: "This is the wrath of God which is come upon us for past iniquity."

Across the steppes, the whisper was echoed in the rustling of the feather grass and its only answer was the note of a bird from a shrubby brake, calling: "Sleep, sleep!"

From the charred remnants of towns or villages the passing of God's Fool was perpetually reported, a voice crying in the wilderness further dismal prophecy. But the figure of the prophet was not seen again in that generation. Born of the Almighty Power and of the grey earth, he went on his way, mysterious, invisible, immortal. But from time to time, through the ages, whenever Holy Russia was threatened anew, he would reappear.

To free Novgorod there came again Yaroslav, the father of Alexander. Distracted with grief, he came not to reign, but to give counsel to his family.

"The enemy is once more at our gates. We must make an alliance against him."

"The Tartars are now a long way off," said Alexander; "but if we can raise the strength to pursue and defeat them, let me be the first to go."

"I spoke not of the Tartars. Who would speak of those demons from Hell? Our old enemies, the Lithuanians, backed by the Nemtsy, have taken the opportunity of our trouble to attack and ravage the districts of Smolensk and Polotsk. Mine is the honour of having driven them back once, but they will surely come again."

"The Tartars also may come again, O my father. Should not we first prepare to resist the greater foe?"

"It is not the will of God," said Yaroslav sombrely.

"God has already saved Novgorod, and will continue to help those who help themselves."

"It is His will that the Holy Orthodox Church be protected from the Latins."

"And not from the pagans?"

"The Chuds are also pagans, my son. My place is now at Vladimir, since Yuri and his children are slain. It is for you to hold Novgorod against the menace of the west. And that you may hold it with greater strength, I have asked for you the hand of the daughter of Prince Briachislav of Polotsk."

Alexander had never seen this princess, but he heard now that she was young, fair and pious, and that her name was Alexandra. He knew that the time had come when, for the sake of his country, he must marry. No love of woman had yet stirred his heart. Yet marriage is, according to the teaching of the Church, "the second earthly honour."

He was dutiful, he was still little more than a lad and, as the sap rises in the stem according to the season, so the blood in his veins was warmed with expectation. It would be strange to have in a wife another and perhaps a dearer self. Would they understand one another? Would she share his hopes and fears and be for him an inseparable and trusted companion? Might she even learn to love him, so that the policy of their union faded away and they were able to taste together the ecstacy of passion?

"O little lady, Alexandra," he thought, "do not fear me, for indeed I shall be much more afraid of you! I will try so hard to please you, not only as a prince, but as a man. I will be tender with you, as I would be with a dove in my hands. And I will be strong in your defence, as though you were a pearl of great price."

§

The maiden, Alexandra, had, however, already bestowed her heart. She had bestowed it, not on any living person, but on the memory of her sainted relative, the Reverend Mother Euphrosinia, who had lived in Polotsk and had died there, nearly one hundred years before. Under the continued influence of that devout lady, Alexandra had been trained and educated, till the Reverend Mother was for her a being more present and vital than any earthly companion.

Euphrosinia had loved salvation better than the

humanity that had benefited by her good works. Above other women she had risen superior and no man had she ever loved at all. And this seemed to the little Alexandra a proof of the most exquisite purity.

She delighted to know that while Euphrosinia had still been very young—perhaps no older than Alexandra herself—she had abjured the world and had become a nun. Her seclusion in those early days had been perfect. For her there had been no sordid duties, no menial tasks. But she had spent her entire time in copying the Greek classics of the Church, in fine Slavonic script, and the money she received for this literary and laudable task had been given to the poor, whom she never knew. Later she had founded her own convent and had built a church to the honour of Christ, Who mingled with the poor but Who surely approved her action in placing on His altar a precious crucifix inset with a particle of the true Cross and bearing the inscription: "The holy wood is priceless. The setting of gold, silver and precious stones is only worth money."

How clever Euphrosinia must have been, as well as chaste! How adventurous, moreover; for in her old age she had made pilgrimages to Constantinople and to Jerusalem, and had actually worshipped at the Holy Sepulchre and had placed there an ikon lamp. On the return journey from Palestine, she had died, filled, no doubt, with bliss, for no one could suppose that that visit had taught her a new

humility. She had certainly been a blessed saint and it was Alexandra's glory to know that such a saint had been her relative and her ambition to follow in those admirable footsteps.

How beautiful to escape from earthly cares and from the confusing, shadowy forms of earth-bound people to the glowing sanctuary of the church built by the Reverend Mother! Here two monastic cells opened off an upper gallery and, in one of these, Euphrosinia had lived. Surely her spirit was still present. She seemed to sit by a small window in the thick wall, looking out with aloof eyes on the world, over the city of Polotsk and over the spreading meadows. No figure known to Alexandra was so sublime, so dignified, so free. Never had that figure known the curse of Eve, the multiplication of sorrow and of conception.

O blessed state, which any woman might perhaps attain! O splendid spinsterhood, self-sufficing, untrammelled and easy!

The young maiden, Alexandra, knelt beside the wooden bench, fixed to the wall below the window, and hid her eyes. Thus she could imagine that her arms rested on a lap, covered with the folds of a soft woollen garment; she had a more intimate sense of the beloved presence. Her knees ached on the stone floor and she moved them. Suddenly there was the tangible feeling that they touched some projecting object. She did not dare to lift her eyes. It must be a miracle. The figure of

the Reverend Mother must have materialised and the object must be her foot.

Alexandra's joy was so great that she could hardly breathe. This was the sign that the Mother accepted her as daughter and disciple. She might herself take the veil and pass the rest of her life in this quiet cell.

At last she ventured to look up. The sunlight streamed through the window across the bare bench and across the floor, till it was lost in the shadow of the gallery beyond. Alexandra still felt the projecting object against her knee. She leant down and her hand touched a wooden box, bound with iron and grey with dust. The cover lifted easily. Within there was something wrapped in folds of rotting, tawny-coloured silk. She drew it out and beheld a picture, framed in blackened silver and set with precious stones.

With the hem of her dress she dusted and rubbed the face of the picture. Then she drew a deep breath of wonder and delight. From records left in the church, she knew that the Reverend Mother had brought back from her visit to Constantinople a splendid gift obtained from the Emperor Manuel —a marvellous painting, no less sacred than the famous Mother of God of the city of Vladimir, for, like that ikon, it also was a portrait of the Madonna and Child, and the artist had been Saint Luke. It had been called "Our Lady of Ephesus" and ever since the death of Euphrosinia it had not been found, but it had been supposed that she had presented it to some distant convent.

Now it had been discovered by Alexandra, who could not doubt that it was a miraculous legacy from her relative. She held the picture to the light and carefully scanned it.

Time had not dimmed its beauty, eternity could not lessen its appeal. A young Maiden, with a face of angelic loveliness, held in her arms a Babe, infinitely tender and real, Who seemed to nestle there in deep content. Her adoration of Him was expressed in her look of perfect peace. His love for her and all the world was clearly portrayed in His wise smile. Here was the fulness of joy and here was all that Euphrosinia had not known in life.

But that Alexandra could not guess. She felt that the mere possession of the picture, so long concealed, was the crown to a perfect existence. And this crown was now her own. No mortal woman could hope to share the ineffable happiness of the Divine Mother. The nearest attainable was to share that of the Reverend Mother. She would spend the remainder of her days in retreat, treasuring and kissing this glorious ikon, far from the world of men and for ever close to God.

Nor did it occur to her that, in such retreat, a day had come for the Reverend Mother, when the ikon had to be hidden deep in its box, because she could no longer bear to look upon the Face of God.

Alexandra carried her treasure to her father, Prince Briachislav of Polotsk. Its authenticity was proved and she was allowed to retain possession of

it. Soon after she received her father's command that, for high reasons of state, it was impossible for her to take the veil, but that she must marry Prince Alexander Yaroslavovich of Novgorod.

§

She travelled from Polotsk in an immense caravan of relations and friends, along the river Dvina, to Toropetz, where the wedding was first to be celebrated. And before the long journey, that would take her half-way to Novgorod, was over, she was sick with weeping.

She was like a lamb going to the slaughter. She would not be parted from the ikon, night or day, but prayed before it continually that she might be saved by sudden death from this marriage.

Her prayer was not granted. Young, splendid and full of hope, Alexander rode out from Toropetz to meet her. He bowed low before her and placed his hands on her shoulders and kissed her three times on the cheeks. Then he looked into her pitiful, pretty face, framed in plaits of flaxen-coloured hair, and tried to bring a smile to her pale lips.

"Rest assured, lady, that my only desire is to make you happy."

"I shall seek to obey you, sir."

That was not what he wanted. He longed for a gay spirit of adventure to match his own. It was the only spirit that could carry them both through the ordeal of a marriage of convenience.

Could not she feel that it was difficult for him too? Obviously she could not. Poor little maid; perhaps it was harder for her, but he would win her love in time.

First, there were the long preparations for the wedding. Every day and all day they went together to the great cathedral of Toropetz, keeping a strict fast and eating nothing but vegetables and bread.

Alexander prayed to Christ, as to an unfailing Friend: "O Lord, bless this union. Thou only canst understand. Thou only canst help."

Alexandra prayed to the Reverend Mother Euphrosinia, secure among the saints: "O Mother, thy gift, the holy ikon, has not saved me. If thou also wilt not save me, it must be a sign that the ikon was not for me and I will present it, in sacrifice, to the cathedral."

The wedding day dawned. Alexandra had presented the ikon to the Archbishop, who had received it with rapture and had assured her that it should always remain at Toropetz, in memory of the happy occasion of her wedding.

The city was crowded with assembled officials and all the guests invited from Polotsk and from Novgorod. There were chiefs of the army and their wives; there were the match-makers, who had arranged the marriage; there were many of Alexander's personal friends to act as his best men and equerries; and boyars in great number. There was the Master of the Horse, the Custodian of the Forage, the Bearer of the Wedding Cake and

pages carrying carpets and the foot-cloth of the nuptial ceremony: a great and goodly company, all rejoicing in the bright weather of early spring and in this auspicious day, which was to save northern Russia from her western enemies.

So much were these enemies dreaded that the Mongol menace seemed insignificant. They were taught by the Orthodox Church and believed that they could not afford to consider the pagan Tartars, while the pagan Chuds, backed by the power of Rome, took advantage of their disruption and remained undefeated.

In the central hall of the palace, Alexandra awaited the message to join her bridegroom at the cathedral. She was robed in cloth of silver, festooned with pearls, and her pale hair was spread like a cape over her shoulders. She sat at a long table with the fairest and most richly attired ladies, and before them were placed loaves of bread, cheeses and the round wedding cake, iced with white sugar. The gentlemen of the household stood facing them, bearing lighted and decorated candles and gifts of brightly embroidered stuffs.

At a given signal, the two principal best men here present cut the bread, the cheese and the cake, and handed it round and the candle bearers distributed the gifts: to one lady, a towel of soft linen worked with golden threads; to another, a silken kerchief; to another, a woollen shawl.

At last the fateful message came from the cathedral. Alexandra donned her wedding veil and set

forth in a splendid equipage, the centre of a magnificent procession, over a road covered with carpets. Close beside her rode one carrying holy water in a silver bowl, and the bearers of the wedding candles, still alight, brought up the rear.

At the door of the cathedral, Alexander, a resplendent figure in crimson and gold, had dismounted from his Arab charger. He took his bride's hand, but her face was hidden from him. As he led her through the porch, dried hops were thrown over their heads by church attendants. They were married. Then together they received the Holy Sacrament.

As in a dream, Alexander found himself once more in the open air and sunlight. Now they would drive back to the palace, over the carpeted road, amid the acclamations of the multitude kept strictly to each side by special guardians. He would retire at once to his own quarters and, after an interval during which the bride had her hair plaited and braided, was crowned and re-veiled, she would be brought in to him and he would surely woo and win her.

Strengthened by solemn ceremonies, he no longer feared the outcome. He thought not of himself, but of her and, as they drove, he heard with pleasure a woman's voice singing sweetly in the crowd the old wedding song:

"I do not ask of you, my father,
A golden crown, a silver carriage,
A dowry rich. Will not you rather
Bestow your blessing on my marriage?"

The song was taken up and repeated by other voices all along the route and Alexander turned, glowing, to his little wife:

"It is for you they are singing, sweetheart. They know how good and dutiful you are."

"I shall endeavour, sir, to remain the same," murmured Alexandra in a lifeless tone.

VII

The first voice that had raised the old wedding song in the street belonged to a young woman of the people, whose beauty was distinctly remarkable. Her height was above the average and the grace of her figure was that of a growing flower. She wore a holiday but weather stained dress of blue home-spun with a black kerchief knotted around her white neck and caught to her generous breast with a red flower. Her thick auburn hair was confined with another kerchief of rose-coloured cotton, embroidered with black and yellow arabesques. Her face was at once tender and impudent, extraordinarily expressive, innocent as that of a young animal, but self-reliant. The perfection of colouring and features, the porcelain texture of the skin, the large reddish-brown eyes fringed with thick lashes, the short Grecian nose, the rather full laughing lips that set a dimple in either cheek—made of it a face appealing to the passions of men.

Her voice was shrill but sweet, like a bird's and, as the wedding procession passed and receded in the distance, she stood on tiptoe and waved her thin and not too clean hands above her head. A bearded civilian official, whose duty it was to keep back the crowd from the carpeted centre of the road, turned, looked her up and down and smiled.

"Well, song-thrush, what forest are you from?"

"From one where I saw no jays as fine as yourself," she retorted.

"God save you! So you came to seek a mate here?"

"Would I tramp from Novgorod, begging my way and getting a lift where I could, for anything but to see the wedding of our blessed saint, Prince Alexander?"

"Hark to her," laughed the man. "She flies high to give her heart to the prince. What's your name, pretty one?"

"They call me Vassilissa Ivanovna, though my mother never knew if my father was Ivan or Boris or Dmitri. What does it matter! Nothing matters but love and pleasure. I gave my heart to Alexander Yaroslavovich long ago and flew no distance to do it. I just laid it near his foot with a kiss on his stirrup leather and his servant will have cleaned it away. But you can have the rest of me for a meal and a silver coin, because I like the look of you."

The merry crowd began to break up, but the man edged closer to the girl and stole an arm round her firm waist.

"There will be feasting in the city to-night, Vassa. There will be pleasure abroad. Shall we taste happiness together, little dove? Will you be kind?"

"So long as you pay, I will love you a little." She stroked his bearded face and chuckled with childlike glee. "But you must not weep when I leave you. I cannot bear tears and I'm for the highest bidder. My body is fair, isn't it? They

told me so at Novgorod. O ay! I'll make you happy, my lad. But I must go back to Novgorod some day."

He led her proudly through the city, delighted with her frankness, flattered by the admiring glances that were cast on her by other men. And though he knew her for what she was—a woman of no value—something simple and naïve in himself, a remnant of boyhood, revered and truly loved her kindness.

§

Next day, the Princess Alexandra, whose marriage to the prince was now consummated, submitted to the ceremony of having her flaxen hair cut short, as a symbol of domesticity. Her sobs and wails, during the operation, were genuine as well as conventional, and her woe-begone face, when she rejoined her husband and the second bridal procession, did little to add to the hilarity of the occasion.

For now they were paraded for the wedding feast in the richly decorated hall. To the sound of music, they took their places at the long tables, covered with embroidered cloths and every kind of succulent fare. The bride and groom had the seats of honour, called the red corner, with various holy ikons hanging above their heads. Immediately before them was set another round white wedding cake, fairer than the first. And before anything else, they had to taste solemnly of this together, since it signified their union.

Then the elaborate meal began for all. There were roasted swans and geese, there were jellies called "kissel" made of fruit and wheat, there was green wine or vodka in abundance and mead mixed with honey.

None could have guessed from the display that more than half the Russian land had been ruined and devastated by an implacable enemy, who still lurked on the eastern frontier and might return as far as this district at any time. The Mongol menace was forgotten and only the reason for this festival, the preparation to resist the western foe, was remembered.

Long and loud the boyars pledged the prince who was to stand for the Orthodox faith. With enthusiasm they vowed to follow wherever he should lead, calling him the champion of his country.

Alexander returned their salutations gaily, but at intervals his face was grave and, beyond putting dainties from his own wooden eating-bowl into that of his bride, he did not pay her much attention.

He longed to escape from this festival. He desired the battlefield rather than the bridal chamber. There, as in woodland sport, a man might surely find his ideal of comradeship and, in service for his country, might discover the truest freedom.

How precious to him was Novgorod, which his prayers had saved from the Mongol advance—dearer than any woman could be, because so virile and so independent. He thought of Novgorod as Yaroslav had long since thought, but with this

difference, that Novgorod for him was not identified with his bride. Novgorod was no pale dismal creature, but a deep-bosomed ragamuffin of a maid in a tattered yellow frock, with laughing eyes and wild red hair. And she had caught his stirrup leather and kissed it. And he had promised that no enemy should come near her. . . .

He passed his hand across his brow. Strange, forgotten vision! Where had he ever seen that vivid figure?

Suddenly messengers were ushered into the hall. They had ridden swiftly from Novgorod, despatched by the Véché, to bear tidings of immediate war. The pagan Chuds, led by the Germans of Riga, were mustering in force on the bank of the Sheloni river. Behind them were the Teutonic knights of Livonia, and bloody fighting had already begun. Unless the whole power of Novgorod, Pskov and Polotsk were mustered at once under a brave leader, the wild Finnish tribesmen, maddened rather than tamed by Latin influence, and the cruel and cunning Germans, would overrun the country.

"Alexander is our leader! Alexander must ride with us to-day!"

The shouts rang forth as men sprang to their feet from the festive board and waved their arms above their heads.

He clasped his bride and kissed her fervently on the cheeks, then gave her, weeping, to the care of his mother.

The same day, he rode away from Toropetz,

with every boyar and man at arms in the place, happier than he had ever been before.

For Christ and Holy Russia, for Novgorod and freedom, for all that was true and decent against all that was false and vile, they went on crusade with an invincible faith.

§

Meanwhile, the greater enemy in the south-east were preparing for a further advance that no human power should check.

The Mongol ambition was no less than the empire of the known world. This colossal purpose was based on the will and military genius of Chingiz Khan, and was confirmed by unequalled powers of organisation and discipline, which promised complete success.

Batu Khan, a typical Mongol, by some supposed to be the grandson of Chingiz, but more likely to have been of illegitimate descent, had withdrawn his armies for a time to the delta of the Volga, only that they might gather impetus to continue the work of conquest.

First, the district of Sarai had to be cleared of the nomad Polovtsi, Russia's ancient enemies. Large numbers of these people now joined the Mongols and lost their identity. A remnant, with some of the Kipchak tribes, fled to Hungary and were equally lost.

Then Batu received large reinforcements from Mongolia, led by the greatest general of that time,

Subotai the Valiant, who had earlier been victorious on the river Kalka and had since shown his prowess in the Far East. Among its captains, the new army numbered Kuyuk, the son of Ogotai, now reigning in the home land, and Mangu, afterwards to become Grand Khan, the son of Tului.

When all were collected, the Mongol forces, numbering a total of five hundred thousand men, moved westward like a solid avalanche, with their wagons, their standing tents, their siege engines and their cattle. They concentrated on Chernigov, deserted by its rightful ruler, old Prince Michael, and left to the care of one of Michael's younger sons. The city of Chernigov was battered out of existence by huge millstones, hurled from the Mongol engines, and its population perished to a man.

Mangu was sent on to Kiev, which was perpetually changing its government, and now temporarily in the hands of Daniel of Galitch was left by him in the charge of a faithful boyar, while Daniel himself sought refuge in Poland and in Hungary.

The Mongols surrounded Kiev, where few warriors were left from civil war for any defence. But its citizens were brave enough. When the outer walls of the city fell, a new inner wall was raised by the united efforts of men, women and children.

It was of no avail. In a little time, splendid Kiev, with its golden-domed churches and its busy

markets, was not. The living died and the long-since dead were desecrated by the forcing open of their tombs and the trampling of their bones into the dust. Never was a place so barbarously destroyed. For two centuries, the greater part of its site remained a desert and, though it was rebuilt before long, never did it regain its former glory. Thus was the prophecy of God's Fool fulfilled.

Next, the principality of Galicia was ravaged and then came the turn of Poland, equally rent by civil war and helpless. Its capital, Cracow, was soon a ruin and the Mongols went swiftly on to Silesia, found Breslau already burned by its inhabitants and at Lignitz met and inflicted a crushing defeat on Duke Henry and his Polish and German knights. This was the terrible work of Mangu.

Meanwhile, Batu's main army was penetrating Hungary and he was demanding the immediate surrender of its unpopular king, Bela, who, as a pious son of the Latin Church, had sought help in vain by turns from Pope Gregory IX and Frederic II of the Holy Roman Empire.

These two, in fact, had only been intent on resisting each other with all the might of Europe. The Pope, anxious to deliver Italy from German domination, had busied himself in the excommunication of Frederic, the encouragement to revolt of Frederic's subjects, and the promulgation of an idea that the Mongol menace had been Frederic's invention. When the truth was realised,

he preached a crusade against the greater enemy, but was careful to add that nothing mattered except the threat to Papal supremacy.

No ruined countries, no homeless wanderers, no slaughter or famine counted in Christendom beside the double danger of the Church.

"This alone," said Gregory IX, "breaks our bones, dries our marrow, thins our body and causes us such lively anguish that, so to speak, despite ourselves, we do not know which way to turn."[1]

The Emperor Frederic, on the other hand, proclaimed that, when he had restored peace to Italy, he might think about the Mongols. Pending that day, he was quite willing to stir up other European rulers with pious exhortations.

There was no help for Bela, King of Hungary, or Boleslav, King of Poland. Both fled for refuge to the Carpathians, where they found Michael of Chernigov and Daniel of Galitch already hiding.

When these princes eventually returned to their several countries, they found nothing but an expanse of wilderness, where isolated refugees had resorted to cannibalism.

Austria was the next point of attack. Buda and its neighbouring city Pest, on the opposite shore of the Danube, were hastily armed, and the Mongol armies converged on them from Moravia by the defile called the Gate of Russia and from Moldavia by the gorges called the Gates of Hungary. Both

[1] D'Ohsson.

cities were taken and the carnage in the district was so frightful that infection caused the enemy to move away.

But within a few months, the Mongols were again crossing the frozen Danube. A detachment rushed on towards Vienna, but the main body stopped to invest the ancient royal city of Strigonia, or Gran, on the bank of the river.

And, most strangely, the fortress of Gran survived. For it happened that the act of God, which caused the death of Ogotai Khan in the Mongol home land and thereby the withdrawal of the Mongol armies from Europe, so that every general and captain might join in the election of a new suzerain, followed immediately the remarkable action taken by three hundred ladies of Gran.

§

The city of Gran was surrounded with a moat and had high walls, flanked with wooden towers. But when these walls were breached and the towers were burning, the defenders and inhabitants were able to retire within a large and strong citadel of stone, under the command of their valiant Spanish general, Count Simeon.

What had brought this dignified gentleman to the adventure of controlling an Austrian garrison, who shall say? What kept him so far from the attractions of his own country were the blue eyes and the flaxen hair of the Austrian Archduchess Elizabeth. She was one of many princesses of

the Holy Roman Empire, in a minor degree, but she maintained a royal state at Gran, attended by no less than two hundred and ninety-nine ladies, all as beautiful as herself.

And for Count Simeon, there were not three hundred ladies of Gran. There was only the lady Elizabeth.

He did not confess his love, for he was extremely proud. He was prouder than any prince in Europe of his blue blood, of his distinguished appearance, of his martial prowess, of his courtly manners. And if he was not quite so proud of his past, that could always be hidden.

He felt that it could best be hidden by an attitude of polished superiority, especially with regard to the ladies of Gran. He deplored their independence, so different to the conventions of the ladies of Spain. Before ever the Mongols appeared, he frequently recited glowing praises of his own countrywomen to the young Archduchess, as she sat in the company of her sex. He told them how at Seville, no señora would appear without her duenna, and how much maidenly charms were thus enhanced.

"There is no power so great as feminine influence," he said, "and when it is concealed, ah! how it gains in strength. A woman rules by her secret charm and there is no man living who can withstand it. The ladies of this country claim authority, but full control is only theirs through the hearts of men."

"Perchance," one answered, "some men have not such gallant hearts as Count Simeon."

"There can be no barbarian in the world to-day," he said, "who would not be affected to chivalry by a woman's charms. Let her resist, and baser passions prevail. But let her appear in full and tender splendour, suing for mercy, and she must conquer, even as the savage unicorn of legend is subdued by the lure of a lovely maiden."

The lady Elizabeth sighed, for she was of an open disposition, unattracted by the idea of guile.

But the other ladies of Gran gazed admiringly at the dark handsome face of Count Simeon, framed in raven black hair, and they thought: "How splendid he is! How well he understands us! It would be enchanting to be loved by such a man! It would be glorious to help such a man with our influence!"

When the walled city was besieged by an enemy whose terrors had already been reported, every woman was eager to join the warriors in its defence. Count Simeon, however, maintained that warfare was unsuited to the weak. They must remain in the security of the citadel from the beginning, and only by brave obedience could they nerve the men to their protection.

The lady Elizabeth besought him with tears for permission to don armour and appear at his side on the battlements. Other women had fought thus in other cities. Why should not she? In other places, women had helped in the preparation of

cauldrons of boiling oil or water, to be tipped from the walls on to the scaling ladders of the foe. Why might not she share the danger and the glory?

He would not allow her even in his council chamber. Her influence, in fact, could not exist unless it was concealed.

It was impossible that it should be equally hidden, when all were forced to retire to the citadel. Though the place was large, it was now fearfully crowded. And though it was strong, the anxiety of its commander was apparent and the active ministration of women demanded by the wounded was as evident as their influence.

Count Simeon had, of course, never afflicted their tender senses with any truth concerning Mongol atrocities in warfare. All they knew was that the foe was reputed to be strong and fierce. But now they gathered besides that Gran must be held mainly for their safety, and they guessed, from the agonised expression of Count Simeon, that he had little hope. If he were not weighted with the responsibility of their presence, if indeed their influence were removed, they knew intuitively that he would fight with a lighter heart. Some of them were the wives, some the sweethearts and some the sisters of the warriors of Gran; but since all these men supported the opinion of Count Simeon, all the ladies, who admired him, were ready to share the point of view of the young Archduchess, who did not guess his love.

She gathered them around her one day in private and said to them: "The time has come when we must prove our power. Since, according to legend, the fatal unicorn can only be subdued by feminine charm, it is obvious that nothing else will overcome our present foe. Let us therefore deck ourselves in our finest attire and our richest jewels, and secretly sally forth from the citadel to sue for mercy and thus conquer the Mongol army."

One objected that Count Simeon might not let them go.

But the blue eyes of the Archduchess flashed as she answered: "Our influence here may be of little use, but we are not prisoners. The commandant shall not know that we are gone, before our victory is won. There is an underground way, of which even he is not aware, that leads out of the citadel into the heart of the city. This way we will take, so that we shall not be stopped by the sentinels."

Then all the ladies rejoiced at the bold idea, which would surely succeed and would mean the deliverance of Gran. And that night, they ceased their ministrations to the wounded and again retired and privately decked themselves in their finest attire and their richest jewels. Their robes were of damask and cramoisy, sewn with gold and silver and bordered with vair, and their gems were of pearl and enamel and ruby and chrysoprase and emerald. But fairer far than what they wore were their flushed and eager faces and their young bodies'

grace and their long braided hair, flaxen or brown or auburn.

They crept through a secret door and down a winding stair and along a dark and mouldering passage and emerged from the citadel at last into a deserted street of the city. Then they formed themselves into a procession and, lighting candles which they had brought, the three hundred ladies of Gran proceeded towards the Mongol encampment.

Who within the citadel should heed a sound of woeful crying, that suddenly made night hideous? Not Count Simeon, who knew the horrid noises by which the Mongols constantly attempted to terrorise the defence. Not any other warrior at his side, only intent on preserving that defence.

But at early dawn the next morning, a siege engine cast on to the parapet, as its first missile, instead of the usual mill-stone, a soft bundle wrapped in cotton cloth. And when it was opened, it was found to contain many plaits of long hair, flaxen, brown and auburn, all corded together, with this message: "Mongols are not to be seduced. What we conquer we keep. What is offered we kill. O cowards, who send women to use their arts against us, we send you back all that is left of them!"

There was frenzy within the citadel. But after many hours, Count Simeon said: "Do we die in a sortie to avenge the ladies of Gran? Or do we die here for the honour of which we are bereft?"

The warriors answered with one voice: "We die here. For though our women, possessed with madness, have shamed us by their sacrifice, the enemy only seek thus to lure us to an attack by which Gran would be the sooner lost."

Then they fought, desperately, but with care, reserving their strength. And, on a day, suddenly the Mongol forces withdrew and no man knew the reason. The siege was lifted. The citadel of Gran was saved. The influence of three hundred ladies had surely prevailed, if not quite as intended either by themselves or by their natural protectors.

But Count Simeon, who had knotted round his arm a plait of flaxen hair, removed his helm, and his own hair was as white as snow.

VIII

A PERIOD of three years had placed half Europe in the Mongol grasp. Now, halted and recalled to the home land, they conducted a masterly retreat from the banks of the Danube and swept back over the conquered countries.

When they reached the site of Sarai, the capital of the Golden Horde, they stopped. Nothing should move them from that base. It was not worth while to hold the devastated region west of the Dnieper river, but they might well establish themselves in Russia.

Accordingly, their chief leaders went on to the great kurultai in Mongolia, but others remained to confirm their mastery of the Russian land.

What had been happening here, during the interval, deserves no particular record. For Novgorod was the only province which had escaped conquest and, though the Mongols knew that Novgorod had a certain valiant warrior prince, who was protecting its western frontiers from other enemies with signal success, they still believed that Novgorod was subject to ruined Vladimir and therefore subject to them.

Yet a sidelight on the state of Russia at this time may be afforded by a story of one of her boyars, whose most significant adventure was based on the possession of an umbrella.

§

In the days of Kiev's splendour, a young nobleman called Churilo Plenkovich and nicknamed Gosling by his friends and associates, lived richly and fared well. According to a ballad that was sung to immortalise him or one of his forbears who had the same name: "His two eyes gleamed like candles; when he walked abroad, a sunshade was carried in front of him, so that his fair countenance should not be scorched. His boots were of green morocco with soft heels. . . . He trod so softly that, under his heels, a starling could jump forward safely and a flower not be crushed. His hands were white: he wore gold rings and silk gloves: on his head a brimmed hat golden in hue; and his coat was green."

Besides these advantages, he had a palace at Kiev, where the sun, moon and stars were painted on the walls. His intimates were one hundred young men, dandies like himself, and all rode thoroughbred horses of the same colour with bejewelled trappings. When God's Fool, with his dismal prophecies, first appeared in Kiev, they crossed themselves and pressed gold into his hand; then retired to Churilo's palace and feasted behind closed doors.

When civil war ravaged the fair face of Kiev, they fought gallantly enough on one side or the other and held a pleasant camp in the suburbs till the palace could be redecorated.

They were perfectly harmless people, looking on battle as something of a diversion from a state

of peace, which never had time to become monotonous.

And their vanities were childlike. The dearest possession of the Gosling was his sunshade, which was, to be exact, a small oriental umbrella, of yellow silk, with a red and green sequinned and tasselled fringe. It had been bequeathed to him by an ancestor, who had obtained it in Constantinople, and he loved it not only for that reason, but because it was unique in Kiev. It flattered him immensely that it should be mentioned in the ballad and, except when he wore armour, he was seldom seen without it.

The winter day came when Kiev knew from the sound of the Mongol advance—a dreadful sound made up of the creaking of wagon wheels, the neighing of horses and the grunting of camels—that her end was near.

The young boyars rallied round Dmitri, their brave commander. Such fighting they had never known before. From morn till night the battle raged on the city walls, and Churilo saw his hundred friends and many others fall around him.

Himself wounded, he dashed behind the inner wall that had been raised and continued to shoot arrows, with an old woman and a little lad at his side, throwing stones. A rock, hurled from one of the enemy's siege engines, caught them, disembowelled the old woman, smashed the boy's head to pulp, and knocked Churilo senseless.

The next thing he knew was the continuation of the hellish tumult in the city behind him. It was probably day, for he could see clear sky overhead, but in the rear, black night reigned from volumes of smoke, lit only with tongues of flame.

Churilo had no wish to continue fighting. Kiev was undoubtedly lost and he was exceedingly surprised to find himself, from the aching of his wounds, alive. At the same time, his present position, in a heap of dead and dying, offended his most delicate susceptibilities.

"This," said Churilo to himself, "is no war for a gentleman, and I must get out of it."

In the inconsequent manner of a wavering and desperately shocked mind, he then suddenly remembered his umbrella, the symbol for him of all that was desirable. Though kingdoms might totter and fall, though civilisation might wane and sanctity itself be despoiled, one precious object, the object on which his pride had centred, must, if possible, be saved. He raised himself and clearer thoughts supervened. It would be certain death to seek his palace now. Better wait till nightfall. Then if any luck favoured him, he might creep home unobserved and, if his home still stood, it might be possible to collect food and money and to escape.

He threw off his dented helmet, wiped blood from his face and divested himself of his coat of mail. Then from an inner pocket, he drew a scented handkerchief, held it to his nose, lay down again and fell asleep.

When he awoke to pain, the thought of the umbrella recurred and drove him to his feet. Since God surely protects the demented, he found his way somehow in the darkness to the smoking ruin that had been his palace. There he hid amid charred beams and fallen masonry, thankful for warmth, till with another dawn he began to search.

There was little to find. The place had been thoroughly looted before it was burned. Clothes, food, money, jewels, gold and silver plate and precious ikons—all had been taken or destroyed. But at last, beneath a splintered door-post, he detected a shred of yellow silk. He tore at the obstruction till his fingers bled. At last he lifted it and there was the umbrella, still recognisable, the only thing in all Kiev which, to the Mongol mind, was neither worth taking nor destroying.

Churilo fell on it and kissed it. He lay there stroking it and calling it fond names, he even tried opening it and laughed with joy when, comparatively undamaged, it fulfilled its function. Burning with fever, he felt that it restored his self-esteem. A gentleman with an umbrella must always appear respectable.

Yet, as there is no honour in dying under an umbrella, it was more than ever desirable to escape from the place that had been Kiev.

How he did this, no one ever knew. It seemed to him afterwards that he had become a disembodied spirit, floating invisible through the fearful ranks of the enemy. He could remember lying like one

of many dead in a public square. He could recall suffering such intolerable thirst that he drank blood from a gutter. And the moment when he found a loaf of bread in a cellar lived in his memory.

After an eternity, he was out on the high bank of the frozen river Dnieper. There was trampled snow underfoot. There was a clear sky overhead and the sun shone brightly. The enemy had vanished and Kiev lay like a huge smouldering dust-heap.

Churilo, chiefly aware of the sun, opened his umbrella and began to tramp northward. He was very hungry and there seemed little possibility in that ravaged country of finding anything to eat. But again he was protected by Providence. He discovered the frozen carcasses of a Mongol and his horse. The horse was still saddled and, with the idea of resting, not in its proximity but equally not on the snow, he detached the saddle. Under it he found a felt bag filled with something like biscuit. Although he did not know it, it was the dried curd, which the Mongols always carried thus on campaign. He ate it ravenously, dragged the saddle to some distance and lay down with his head pillowed against it. He then tied the felt bag to his back like a knapsack, and its contents sufficed to keep him from starvation as he went on for the next few days.

After that there was a bad period, when he staggered along without food or shelter. But, at the point of death, he came across a deserted farmstead,

with a dead pig in its yard. He first devoured some of the raw meat, then slept under a rotting roof and, next day, managed to make a fire and cook some sort of meal.

As he continued northward, following the course of the Dnieper, he came into the forest zone and met a peasant refugee, madder than himself. This man first tried to kill him, then took him to a cave and fed him on a broth made of roots and acorns.

"Do you know how I escaped from the devil?" he said. "The wind was high, so I spat thrice and cried, 'Devil, devil, show your tail!' And lo! he rode away. The Water One, with green hair and flowing beard, has got him now. I have seen the Wood One with blazing eyes, and he told me so in his loud voice."

Churilo did not open his umbrella before the peasant, lest the peasant should covet it.

For days and weeks and months he tramped on, existing precariously thus. And at last the time came, when he left the Dnieper behind and reached a marshy region, where, in a wilderness of sedge, no sound was heard but the melancholy rustle of stalks.

Not even the Mongols had been able to add to the desolation of this country, though they had probably passed it in their original advance on Novgorod.

Again Churilo found the bodies of men and horses in the frozen bogs, and kept himself alive with dried curd.

He had by now lost the sense of time or distance, but he had not yet lost his umbrella. Its yellow silk hung in wisps, its green and red sequinned fringe had almost disappeared, but, by some miracle, it was still possible to open its rusty frame and, in the sunshine of spring-time, Churilo held it above his head to shade his blackened countenance.

A young woman driving forth from the city of Toropetz in a decent, though modest equipage drawn by two horses yoked abreast, beheld him walking in this manner along the road and was puzzled to see a beggar indulging so odd a whim. As he was going in the same direction as herself, she stopped her driver and asked Churilo kindly whither he was bound. He gazed at her with blank eyes, and she took a gold coin from a silk purse and offered it to him.

"Accept it, in the name of Christ," she said, "to help you on your way."

Her large reddish-brown eyes smiled upon him, her red hair showing beneath a dark kerchief shone with the glory of a golden dome, her face was beautiful as an angel's.

Churilo ignored the coin. "Which of the blessed saints are you?" he said.

She laughed merrily. "No saint, but a sinner, sir. They call me Vassilissa Ivanovna, though none could say if my father's name was Ivan."

"I adore you," said Churilo. "I will dedicate the remainder of my life to you. And in token thereof, I will now endow you with all I possess."

So saying, he closed the umbrella, laid it on her lap, himself got into the carriage, sat down beside her and in a tone of authority, commanded the driver to proceed.

"But you are charming, my poor fellow," cried Vassilissa. "The friend with whom I lived in Toropetz certainly loved me dearly and was a proper man besides, but he had no such air as you, in all your rags."

"Are you leaving him?" inquired Churilo.

"It seems best," she answered, "though he is heart-broken. The opportunity offered for him to make a good marriage, you understand, and I wanted to go to Novgorod. Since his wife's dowry would be sufficient, he made me a handsome settlement and our parting was beautiful. But perhaps you have not yet breakfasted to-day. I have food here."

She gave him bread, cheese and wine from a basket under the carriage seat, and watched him as he ate like a wolf.

"That is better," she said in a maternal tone when he could eat no more. "Now you can tell me who you are and where you want to go."

"My name is Churilo Plenkovich. I am of Kiev, which is vanished. The brightest and the best called me Gosling. So you may call me too. . . . Novgorod, you said? My mother came from Novgorod. It was my mother's father who got this, in Tsargrad." He touched the umbrella. "Alas! it is torn," he said, and wept.

She took him to Novgorod and engaged a small but substantial house to harbour them both. She spent her money upon him and nursed him back to health and served him like the best of wives.

Every day he grew to love her and to depend upon her more. Her modesty and discretion were beyond all praise. She dressed with exquisite neatness and her manners were above reproach. She was at once the most practical and the most spiritual creature imaginable. She did not value her body, though she respected it, and her soul remained as free as air. Her beauty seemed steadily to increase, like that of a blooming flower.

She found Churilo's relations and showed them his umbrella. It was the proof of his identity. Suddenly he found himself welcomed and acclaimed as the sole survivor of Kiev. He was restored to his position in the world and to some of his former affluence.

He knelt at the feet of Vassilissa, and said to her: "It is impossible for me to live without you, Vassa. If you will, I am ready to marry you, for indeed I have not met your equal in any woman on earth."

She raised him and kissed him on both cheeks.

"Dear Gosling," she answered, "you have a good disposition. I could not take advantage of it. No, I will not marry you, but to oblige you, I will continue to live with you. I gave my love long since to our prince, Alexander, and it is like dust under his horse's hooves. He has never known that I exist. Yet as those who love God learn

thus to love all mankind, you may always depend upon me."

He made her the head of his household. He showered gifts on her and treated her with honour. In a certain grade of society, she was regarded as a great lady and she repaid him with unswerving fidelity.

§

When Alexander left his wedding feast at Toropetz to go on campaign against the Finnish tribesmen, Kiev had not fallen. But afterwards, with short intervals of married life at Novgorod, he was engaged during some little time in various triumphant battles, till a day came when he was called forth again to meet the power of the Swedes, who desired to gain possession of the Chud regions.

These pagans, once enslaved by German might and at present subdued by Russian might, were utterly defenceless. Prince Birger, the brother-in-law of the Swedish king, brought his ships to the mouth of the river Neva, thus closing the way to the Baltic, and sent an insolent message to Alexander.

"If you have courage, come hither. I am preparing to occupy your land and, if you doubt it, I will come and fetch you."

There was no lack of courage in Alexander. He would not wait for reinforcements from his father, Yaroslav, now at Vladimir. He was content with a small army of Novgorod men and was ready to start immediately.

A solemn Mass was celebrated at the cathedral of Saint Sophia, to bless the troops and their leader for action. After the service, Alexander addressed the great crowd assembled in the public square.

"God is not in might but in truth," he said. "We go in God's name for the cause of justice. Therefore we cannot fail."

And, as before, all men called him blessed, and looked on him as one divinely inspired.

IX

THE small army of Novgorod was encamped on the marshy bank of the river Neva, where, after many centuries, Petersburg was to be built. It was a still and splendid night of July and, although the following day would be the Sabbath, battle would be joined with the Swedes at dawn.

Men of the Ijora tribe of Finns had welcomed the Russians to their land and had made common cause with them. Now Christian peasant soldiers and pagan fishing traders sat together over camp fires and talked about religion. The gods of Nature in whom the Finns believed were no strangers to the Russians. The latter had a deep instinctive veneration for those mighty forces of the wild, which they had worshipped long ago and which had never been overset by the Orthodox faith. They knew the spirits of wind and water and their heroes were the giant whose dreadful voice causes the winter ice to break, and the knight of the deep rivers on whose bosom plenty is carried.

"Yet your rulers seek, like the cruel foreigners, to give our brethren another truth," said a wise old Finn, with slanting eyes.

"So that you may be saved from error, father," laughed a young man of Novgorod.

"In many counsels there can only be confusion," grumbled the ancient. "The ways of our ancestors are best."

"Assuredly, in the business of life. I take it to

be like this: While a man's strong, he fights and follows the old laws and the gods are with him. When he grows weak, he wants kindness and the gods break him, but Christ gives him a helping hand."

"He has power then, this Christ?"

"All the power in heaven and earth. Men killed Him once and, for that reason, their race are not permitted to live in Holy Russia. But Christ rose from the dead and reigned over the old gods and over the hearts of the faithful."

"Wow," grunted the Ijora man. "The foreign Cross Bearers slew our people in the name of Christ. Did He reign in their hearts then?"

"O hoary-headed idolatrous one," said the Russian, spitting. "Cannot you see that we, who came to save you from the Cross Bearers and to kill you ourselves if you resisted, were the only faithful hearts? If you cannot see that, at least you can see that Christ is with us here to save you from the Swedes."

The Novgorod men began to sing a hymn, tuneful and solemn as any sung by a cathedral choir. The Ijora men listened entranced and motionless. And under the stars a spirit of fellowship prevailed.

Prince Alexander walked alone on the river-side. His age was twenty-one and, after the glamour of military prowess, the reaction of a deep melancholy possessed his soul. War, he thought, was surely not the chief end of life, and though this war was like the other that had engaged him, for the immedi-

ate protection of Novgorod, he knew that the greatest enemies of Russia were not the present Swedes but the distant Mongols.

Why was it necessary to waste strength and time on a western foe, when the demons of the east remained undefeated? Why, above all, should the Swedes, who were the ancestors of his race and therefore might have shown some sympathy for Russia, choose this time to add to Russia's sorrow? The campaign against the pagan Chuds, backed by the hated power of the Holy Roman Empire, had been a different proposition. But the Swedes were Christians and Birger, their prince, was akin to him in blood.

Then was there no love in the world, potent to override ambition and the urge of expansion? Perhaps, from their own point of view, the Scandinavians were right in fulfilling the law of Nature. Perhaps Russia could do no more than die, having proved herself unfit to survive.

But there was no glory in such a death. Might not it be better to sue for peace at once—to say, in effect: "War is madness—you and we should understand one another. Take our land and we will serve you as vassals to overthrow the powers of darkness. For your strength is great, and together we might save Europe."

That would be the far-seeing policy of civilisation. The day was surely past when nations with one supreme uniting interest could stand apart and opposed. In the face of frightful danger, there

was no salvation for Christendom, unless it followed the law of Christ.

Thus, superior to his time and imbued with a fine ideal, he reflected. And in the moonlight, the wide stream of the Neva shone like polished steel and, on that surface, Alexander suddenly beheld a small ship floating, pointed towards the bank. She was unlike any ship he had seen before and in her lines there was something strange and ghostly. She had the shape, but not the size of an ancient Viking vessel. Yet no oars propelled her and her single sail, which portrayed the design of a cross, seemed made of gossamer and was not filled with any earthly wind.

The ship drew in among the reeds, the sail was lowered, and Alexander, wading knee-deep in the water, saw two men whose faces reminded him of those pictured in an ikon at Novgorod. They were young, fair and smooth, but they had that angular form which is peculiar to early Byzantine art.

"Peace be unto you, Alexander," said one. "I am your ancestor, Glaib, the son of Vladimir."

"And I am his brother, Boris," said the other.

Then Alexander saw that there was a halo round each of their heads, and he recognised them as the sainted offspring of he who, with a Greek wife, had long ago brought the Orthodox faith to Russia.

Glaib and Boris, the favourite younger sons of that union, had been destined to inherit holy Kiev, but they had suffered martyrdom at the hands of a

jealous kinsman from the north, before Kiev had passed to a senior. So soon had strife followed on the heels of Christianity!

And now their saintly spirits, harbouring no malice, had come north to communicate with the descendant of their murderer.

It was impossible to fear their mild demeanour, but Alexander thought they might well have appeared to warn him against continuing the present campaign. The vision was appropriate to his thoughts and Vladimir I, their father, had certainly been a true Varangian, nearer to the Swedes than to any present Russian.

After introducing themselves to him, however, they continued only to address each other and, though he did not dare to speak, it was evident that they were aware of his mind.

"Our little kinsman, Alexander, appears to be troubled, Brother Boris," said Saint Glaib.

"Doubtless because he is less experienced than ourselves, Brother Glaib," said Saint Boris.

"His innocence does him credit," said Saint Glaib. "For, in his reflections concerning the value of internationalism, I see no ulterior motive."

"We, living in eternity, can see that such a motive might some day affect human affairs, with regard to trade," said Saint Boris.

"Certainly," said Saint Glaib, "but the principle has always existed. It is contrary to human nature and it is illogical, but it is a law unto itself. Therefore it prevails."

"Be so kind as to expound it for the benefit of the boy," said Saint Boris.

"The first unit of human society is the family," said Saint Glaib; "the second is the village; and the third, broadly speaking, is the nation. Thus there is growth, which may culminate in congeries of small states or nations. And, except for the peculiarity of human nature, there is no reason why the growth should not continue, till it comprises all the nations upon earth. That is the end to which all civilised people are driven by the principle. But alas for them, directly they attain the first step of their progress, one small state of the congeries, more virile than the others, inevitably overtops and rules the rest, which must then fall back to the original unit."

"This pacific policy is then far from concord, since it results in despotism?" said Saint Boris.

"It appears so," said Saint Glaib. "For God would not have given man the will to fight, unless, by that will, man was intended to preserve a condition of equilibrium."

"Can our little Alexander understand this paradox, that national war may be more coalescent than an international combination?" said Saint Boris.

"Perhaps not," said Saint Glaib. "He is young and possessed with the ideal. Put it to him thus. If he yields to our avaricious relations, the Swedes, why should not they both yield to the Mongols, since the human race are all of one family? The Mongols happen to be supreme at the moment,

and the Swedes would like to take the second place. But that second place belongs by right to Russia, established by our father, Vladimir. Therefore, let Alexander defend the right, and we will be with him."

"Even although the right is against the dictates of brotherly love?" said Saint Boris.

"If you remember, brotherly love availed nothing when the accession to the throne of Kiev was in question," said Saint Glaib dryly.

"For shame, dear Glaib," chuckled Saint Boris, "where is your forgiveness? Have you forgotten that the Church has since invested us with crowns of martyrdom?"

"Nevertheless," said Saint Glaib, "I can recall striking a shrewd blow for my own ere I died."

"Let Alexander do the same," said Saint Boris, "and we will ride at his right side and at his left."

The figures faded into the moonlight, the gossamer sail was raised again and the ghostly ship was wafted away with a breath of wind.

Alexander was left, standing alone, amid the reeds, thrilled by the vision and strongly encouraged by the words he had heard. He hastened back to the camp and made no secret of the visitation of the two saints. And while his officers and men were ready to believe him, the Ijora warriors were no less heartened by their conviction that what had actually appeared and spoken were the ancient gods of the river.

§

It was known that the Swedes had landed their forces. Therefore, in the darkest hour before the dawn, Russian volunteers, numbering Christians and pagans alike, went forth in the Ijora dugout canoes to attempt cutting off the enemy by an attack on his vessels. Then, as the first streak of morning showed in the east and plunged the west in deeper shadow, out from that shadow the Swedish host on foot advanced. Alexander with his staff rode forward, and saw Birger with his captains at its head.

"Come on, my young bear," called Birger when they were within earshot. "This fight should suit a barbarian like yourself, the ally of pagans and one who must know well how to resist his kindred."

Alexander flung himself from his horse and rushed forward. "My kindred are with us rather than with you," he shouted, and threw his mailed gauntlet full in Birger's face, so that the great bully staggered back.

It was a signal to fire the blood on both sides. Throughout that Sabbath day, the battle raged along the shore of the Neva, and the reeds were trampled flat in blood-stained water. Innumerable Swedes fought with Berserk fury, but the small force of Russians, carrying their holy banners, portraying pictures of the saints, held their ground. Wherever his men were most hardly pressed, there was Alexander in their midst, radiantly certain of a victorious issue and shouting in his sonorous voice: "Saint Glaib and Saint Boris are with us to defend the Neva! Strike for freedom and the way to the sea,

brothers! Strike hard and fear nothing! The Neva is ours—ours!"

"Slava! Slava! Prince Alexander of the Neva!" yelled the army. "Alexander Nevski for ever! Alexander Nevski, favoured of saints and gods!"

He seemed to bear a charmed life. He lost his helmet, and his crisp gold-brown hair in the sunlight streamed like a glory round his head. He was magnificent and men died for him with joy, because of the worship he inspired.

At last the Swedes began to yield. Then, from amongst them, the cry went up that their ships in the river were burning. Panic possessed them and disorganised their ranks. The Russians and the Ijora men drove them into the water, slashed at them with swords and battle-axes, crushed them with iron-studded clubs, clutched their throats with bare hands, trampled them and drowned them in that Neva where they had dared to trespass.

The mighty victory was won. Alexander rode along his marshalled ranks and, as they acclaimed him, it seemed to him that Heaven and earth rejoiced. Even the wounded were smiling and the dying called on him with their last breath: "Bless us, Alexander Nevski!"

He had saved for them what they valued more than life, their land. And he took no credit to himself, but praised and thanked them all and was full of merciful plans for the relief of the suffering.

At last they rode back to Novgorod. The news of their triumph had gone before them, and word

had come back that there was double cause for happiness, in that, during his absence, a son had been born to Alexander and to the Princess Alexandra. He took it as another sign of Divine favour. All his prayers had been directly answered and he was at the pinnacle of his hopes. What could be more glorious than love, youth, strength and victory, all enjoyed together!

Novgorod put on a gala dress to greet him that summer day. Every fear for the future was forgotten. The bells of the cathedral and other churches chimed a wild pæan of welcome. Flags fluttered from the buildings. The main streets were carpeted, as though for a wedding, and strewn with flowers. The people were beside themselves with ecstasy and the new name by which their prince would be called, Alexander Nevski, passed gladly from mouth to mouth and was sounded in a continual roar of exultation, as he passed between the crowds, at the head of his officers, to the palace.

He was thinking chiefly of the son whom he should soon see, the wonderful child who was the crown of his triumph. He thought also of the child's mother, as of some angel lit with heavenly radiance, who would surely now show all the tenderness of a woman.

The heavenly radiance seemed already to envelop him, warm and intoxicating. He saw a sea of smiling faces and bright colours. He heard a noise as of many waters, confirming the power of love.

And near the palace gates, he was aware of one

figure, the figure of a lady, sitting at the open lower window of a house. She was a stranger to him and she attracted his attention only because something in her glowing beauty seemed to express all that was in his mind. So wonderful was she and so apart from everyone else, that it even occurred to him later, that she must have been a figment of his imagination.

She wore a bright gold-coloured dress and she leaned her arms on a cushion of green velvet and nibbled sunflower seeds with an air of extraordinary detachment and simplicity. Her head was bare and her thick red hair fell about her shoulders. At the first glance, her lovely face was pensive. But, as her large dark eyes met the blue eyes of Alexander, she smiled, and her smile was like the flash of a naked sword. From it he realised that, where bliss culminates, pain begins.

X

THERE is a moment when perfect earthly happiness seems empty. Man wishes to spring from that summit to further heights and, when he cannot, his spirit falls. Then, in mercy, Heaven grants him another trial.

Alexander's new-born heir was all that a child should be. The Princess Alexandra was the most dutiful of wives. The dowager Feodosia was rapturous over the triumph of her son. And, since Yaroslav had gone with his other sons to restore order to Vladimir, here remained a family so united and so honoured that melancholy should have been wholly absent from its midst.

Yet first, Alexander suffered the reaction to which the Russian temperament, so easily overstrung, is liable. That sensitive Slav temperament, common to his race and the foundation of his genius, caused him, for no reason, acute depression following on acute joy.

And secondly, the fickle nature of Novgorod and an exaggerated sense of independence led to a disagreement between himself and the Véché. The complaint was made that Novgorod was not, after all, entirely indebted to his prowess for its freedom. It had maintained this freedom alone, long before he or his father had come to rule there. Yaroslav had taken many Novgorod men to Vladimir and had settled men from Vladimir in the province of Novgorod, as though the disposal of the land were

his own. Alexander must remedy this grievance or he would forfeit the approval of the city.

The popular outcry was, however, as is usual in such cases, inspired by a few interested propagandists, boyars who were afraid of losing their own power under the control of Yaroslav's family. The voice of the people, far from being the voice of God, was not even their own voice, but an echo of the landowners'. While Novgorod insisted on its rights, its government, like that of most republics, was nearer to the undisciplined despotism of a minority, than to the will of a democracy. So liable indeed were the so-called 'sovereign' people to be swayed by any leader, that their only chance of real freedom would have lain in the direct control of an autocrat.

Alexander realised this and the opposition he met restored his self-confidence. He invited the representatives of the Véché to his palace, as though he were their master, and said to them: "If Novgorod is not satisfied with my ways, I and my family will leave the place. I will not be coerced. It is for you to say what shall happen."

The posadnik, or burgomaster, as the spokesman of the citizens, stood before him, fumbling with a fur-rimmed cap and unable to meet his eyes.

"You must know, prince," said the posadnik with the obstinacy of a stupid man, "that in all matters of government it has been the rule hitherto to consult our wishes."

"Is not that what I am doing now?" said Alex-

ander sweetly. "I ask you to choose between my departure and my judgment."

"It is not only the matter of interference from Vladimir," continued the posadnik evasively. "It is said that too much of the land is occupied for the personal use of princes, in respect of their hunting and fishing grounds and bee farms."

"Then I will relinquish my share and it can be divided between boyars and citizens. But I will not stay to see the division made."

"Perhaps, sir, you do not fully understand the question. We can ill spare you from Novgorod. The people love you."

"I understand perfectly," said Alexander, smiling. "The time has now come to test my value and your affection. Good-bye."

A few days later, he and his wife, his infant son and his mother left Novgorod for Pereyaslavl Beyond the Forest, that northern retreat, where Yaroslav had once, long since, taken refuge from dissension.

There were no crowds in the streets to watch them go. There was no golden lady sitting at a window nibbling sunflower seeds and smiling. But the poorer classes, the "small folk," stood in silent groups at the wayside and followed the swiftly drawn sledges with musing and sorrowful eyes.

Life at Pereyaslavl Beyond the Forest was monotonous and restful. But soon the news came that Novgorod, unable to govern itself and threatened by traitors and Livonian knights at Pskov, had

turned, with a prayer for assistance, to Yaroslav of Vladimir, beseeching him to use his influence to persuade Alexander to return. Alexander explained the situation to Yaroslav and remained firm in his refusal.

Yaroslav had the choice of three other sons, one of whom might be sent as a figurehead to Novgorod. There was Andrei, next in age to Alexander, but not altogether trustworthy. There was Constantine, a serious youth whom Yaroslav wanted beside him at Vladimir. And there was young Michael, a truculent hot-headed boy who would hardly be suitable. Finally Andrei went and did little good to Novgorod, for he sided with the boyars and showed scant sympathy to the people.

§

Yaroslav wrote to Alexander from Vladimir:

"My position here is now fraught with difficulty and peril. The ancient capital of our country, which none could recognise so complete is its ruin, is still, for the Tartar enemy, the heart of Holy Russia, that must be rebuilt. Kiev no longer exists and Michael of Chernigov, who held it once, is now without possessions or hope. It is rumoured that Daniel of Galitch, equally homeless, is in treaty with Rome for aid from the west. That would mean his subjection to the Pope—a subjection that no Orthodox prince should tolerate. The alternative for Daniel, as for me, is subjection to the Tartars. From their base at Sarai, they are already

demanding my presence with tribute. I shall be obliged to go. Constantine and certain boyars will accompany me, but God knows what will be the outcome. Pray for me, Alexander, best beloved son. Ask also the prayers of your mother and of your wife."

Alexander's heart ached for his father, that gentle prince, bowed with sorrow, who must carry a further burden in submitting as a vassal to the savage pagan enemy. He would gladly have left all and gone with Yaroslav, but he saw Yaroslav's wisdom in taking Constantine. It was Alexander's duty to remain in the north, lest Novgorod, as yet unconquered, rejected Andrei and required him back on his own terms.

After several anxious months, another letter came from Yaroslav, despatched from Sarai:

"Be comforted, dear son, for my safety. Batu, the Khan of these Mongols, whom we have called Tartars, is a greater prince than any Polovtsi we have known. It is amazing to me that one who is a pagan and has shown himself so merciless in warfare, should, in the end, be considerate to misfortune. I am treated with honour and courtesy. I want for nothing but, in this encampment of Sarai, am surrounded with luxuries of the west and east, that could not be found elsewhere in Russia. Their might is enormous. Their riches are boundless. God forgive me that I should be impressed by these evidences of ferocity and plunder. But I am amazed at everything I see and hear and no less astonished that they treat me with deference

and refer to me as prince of Vladimir and of Kiev. Constantine is to travel on to Mongolia with a party of their warriors. I remain here, since the further journey would be beyond my strength."

Alas, poor Yaroslav! It was evident that Batu Khan, who could enforce his submission, preferred to ensure it by cunning flattery and the use of empty titles.

Soon the truth was apparent. Daniel of Galitch, while finding favour with the Pope, looked in vain for material help from the west. The Mongols then invited his allegiance and treated him with as great deference as they had shown to Yaroslav. He returned to Orthodoxy and submitted to his fate, which was complete obedience to Batu's orders and no possibility of escape from a position of virtual enslavement.

"Oh, worse than woe is honour coming from the Mongols," was to be his cry, before, at last, he died of sorrow.

The end of old Prince Michael of Chernigov was terrible but not so bitter. Refusing empty promises from west or east and filled with an implacable religious faith, he was forced at last to go to Batu's Golden Horde and pay allegiance. He was accompanied by one intimate boyar, his only friend. But though his presence might be required, his soul could not be commanded. He was determined to die as a martyr of Orthodoxy.

It was a law of the Mongols, that any strangers coming to their encampments should be conducted

by their Shamans between blazing fires, as a ceremony of purification. This symbolic act, based on veneration of Heaven's light, which the Mongols worshipped, was regarded by Michael of Chernigov as base idolatry Despite persuasion, he and his boyar firmly refused to take any part in the ceremony. When they learned that their lives would be forfeit, they were more obdurate than ever. Not only Batu and his chieftains, but Russian compatriots at Sarai urged them to show some tolerance for Mongol beliefs.

"Never," cried Michael to all entreaties. "Tell the Khan that we will not go between fires, nor bow down to idols."

The fierce warriors of the Horde were becoming enraged, convinced that Michael and his friends must be potent wizards, who meant to cause destruction that only the fires could avert. It was impossible to protect the two old men. The officers and other Russians withdrew, and the horsemen galloped up, fell on the pair and brutally killed them.

Before he died, Michael's voice was heard saying:

"Thy martyrs, O Lord, who have not rejected Thee, suffering for Christ's sake, undergoing many torments."

Their bodies were taken by the Russians living at Sarai, to Chernigov, where for a time they rested, till, at a later period, they were removed to the cathedral of the Archangel Michael at Moscow.

§

Thus did Daniel of Galitch suffer and thus did Michael of Chernigov endure. And before these things happened to them, Yaroslav of Vladimir was obliged to go the same way. He had not long enjoyed the comparative comforts of Sarai, when he was told that he must follow Constantine to Mongolia. He did not feel equal to the long journey? Ah, that was a pity, since it could not be avoided. It was necessary that all vassals should be present at the great kurultai in the home-land for the election of Ogotai Khan's successor. Surely so important a figure as the Prince of Vladimir and Kiev—Grand Duke of Russia—could not be absent. And perhaps, after all, the journey would not be so arduous. Constantine had already gone and seemed content to remain at the court of Karakorum, among many other Europeans. Moreover, certain missioners of the west, two Friars, an Italian named John of Piane de Carpine and a Pole named Benedict, despatched by the Pope, had not long since passed through Sarai on the same route.

"My grief lies in leaving Russia so far behind," said Yaroslav.

"Rather might you welcome the chance of seeing another country," said Batu, with rude humour.

Yaroslav, accompanied by a Mongol escort, set forth on that terrible journey, without any spirit of adventure and without hope of seeing his native land again. Devastation he had known and ruin he had seen, but now it seemed to him that the whole world must have been brought to this state

by the Mongol armies. For mile after mile stretched the desert they had made of once fertile districts. For week after week Yaroslav rode the fresh relays of horses that were constantly provided and grew steadily weaker from fatigue, hunger and cold to which he was not inured.

At last, more dead than alive, he reached the summer camping ground, where the Mongols and surely all the people of the earth were gathered under the Empress-Regent, Turakina, Ogotai's widow, to celebrate the election of her son, Kuyuk.

The scene was like some dream of splendour past imagination. Beyond the vast confines of this country, there was nothing but misery. Within, the wealth of the world seemed gathered.

But the iron of submission had entered too deep into Yaroslav's soul for him to be comforted by any vanity. He looked on the Mongol princes with vacant, tragic eyes. There was Mangu, who had burned Kiev and yet had the effrontery to greet him by that title. There was Kubilai, who had an intelligent and hopeful countenance, which doubtless lied, since he must be as false as any. There was Kuyuk, dressed like a Turkish grandee and scattering largesse, while men whispered that his succession had never been intended by Ogotai and that he would owe it to the machinations of Turakina.

During the course of the festivities, Yaroslav was entertained in the Imperial pavilion, amid Chinese, Persian and Turkish dignitaries, ambassadors from

Egypt and Syria, from the Khalif of Baghdad and from the Ismailian Prince of the Assassins, ruling south of the Caspian. He sat silent while wine and compliments flowed freely. He sat and thought of Russia and of Novgorod which alone remained free, and of his wife, Feodosia, whom he had once identified with Novgorod. How incomprehensible, he thought, are all women and how great is their ambition. He remembered the manner in which Feodosia had flouted and afterwards left him. He remembered her return and his own weak surrender and a period of alarming passion from which she had surely recovered with the birth of Fédor. Or had she not recovered then, but only later when Alexander was born in answer to her prayers? Had her dissatisfied heart merely sought solace in religion, till Alexander had filled it?

In that case, here was their bond of union, for Alexander was the best beloved of them both. First she had been too cold; then, for him, she had been too ardent; then confusingly, she had seemed to chill again. But perhaps the truth was that she had not loved him less, but with a greater dignity, a finer reserve, because she loved their Heaven-sent son more. Perhaps the secret of all women was not ambition but the maternal instinct, so primitive and self-sufficing that they were incapable of realising the devotion of a father. He had parted with Alexander that Novgorod should remain free and that Alexander should be spared this trial. Novgorod would need Alexander again, since he was

its rightful prince, rather than Andrei, but, for its salvation, that fact must never be revealed to the Mongols, lest they demanded further and final submission. Feodosia had her son and was content, but his was the joy of sacrifice. Never had he felt a more tender emotion towards her. His self-respect was restored with the idea that she and Novgorod and Alexander depended on him for protection. In the light of that feeling, he could even forgive his enemies. He could even think kindly of the Empress Turakina, who, after all, was a mother.

He was very tired. He looked vaguely round the assembled company, met Turakina's eyes fixed on him and gravely smiled. Then, voicing his thought, but scarcely conscious of what he said, he spoke in a voice loud enough for all to hear:

"This lady Turakina, who has set aside the rightful heir, must surely love her son also."

There was for a moment a dreadful hush, as some guests looked askance and others secretly grinned. Then musicians struck up a fierce wailing melody on their two-stringed balalaikas and sang:

"What is more dear than life and more divine
Than in the arts of love or war to shine?
Only the sweet forgetfulness that comes
To him transported by a bowl of wine."

Next day, Yaroslav was invited by the Empress to a private audience. He found her attended only by her councillor, a justly detested Turkish merchant adventurer and by her inseparable companion,

a woman called Fatima, whom the Mongols suspected of witchcraft.

Turakina, still handsome, but inclined to stoutness, made Yaroslav sit beside her on a couch covered with furs, and said to him: "At the feast, prince, you smiled upon me and offered me an insult."

He gazed at her with his tragic eyes and was suddenly filled with horror of her opulent charms, her leering glance.

"No insult was intended, lady," he said.

"It will be pardoned," she answered, "in consideration that you will serve us. You spoke of my son Kuyuk, who will be elected Grand Khan by the will of his people. You have a son called Constantine, who has gone on to our capital Karakorum. He is perchance dear to you, as Kuyuk is to me?"

"Ay, lady. Yet neither I nor any of my sons can serve you."

"Ah! You have other sons? One doubtless holds Novgorod in your absence? He should surely visit us too. For though Novgorod is subject to Vladimir, it should be represented here."

"Novgorod is free, lady. Therefore it cannot be commanded through me or my son."

"Yet if you were to send word to Novgorod that its ruler was required here, he would obey his father?"

Yaroslav rose and stood with great dignity before her.

"You should know, lady," he said, "that we Russians prefer the cup of death to dishonour."

Turakina motioned to Fatima, who brought her a pair of golden goblets.

"I have here two cups," she said with soft malevolence. "This one," and she handed it to Yaroslav, "contains our national beverage, kumiss, a harmless decoction of mare's milk. Join me in pledging the name of your son at Novgorod, which I have not yet heard, with the wish that we may meet."

"Give me the other cup," said Yaroslav to the witch-woman.

"It holds something more than milk," cried Turakina.

"It holds liberty," he answered in a strong voice and drank it to the dregs. Pale, but with an expression of joy that his face had never worn before, he let both cups fall to the ground. "I have found the way of escape from the Mongol dominion," he said. "When you and yours are forgotten, lady, the seed of my son shall be remembered."

And with his head held high and his hands crossed on his breast, he left Turakina's presence.

On the following morning, he was discovered dead in his own tent. None doubted that Turakina had poisoned him in revenge for his ill-judged remark at the festival. But the Empress was not satisfied, for none could tell her which of Yaroslav's sons, at this time, ruled Novgorod.

XI

Soon after Alexander had received his father's hopeful letter from Sarai and while yet he knew nothing of the tragic journey to Mongolia, a frantic appeal for help came from Novgorod.

As a protector, Andrei was useless. The Teutonic knights of Livonia had taken possession of Pskov and other frontier towns, where traitorous Russians were acting as German burgomasters. Now children were being taken as hostages from the loyal families of Pskov to the German fortress of Riga. The Chud tribes were being roused once more against Novgorod itself, and already the knights had erected another fortress on the shore of Lake Ladoga. Would not Alexander, who alone could help, who alone had proved himself invincible, forgive and deliver Pskov, the younger brother of Novgorod?

He remembered the games that he and Fédor had played as children.

"You are Pskov," Fédor had said, "and I am Novgorod." And he had answered: "I would rather be Novgorod."

Now he was indeed Novgorod, for without him that place could not survive. And as the elder, the one in authority, he must forget everything but the salvation of his country.

He left his family in security at Pereyaslavl Beyond the Forest and, as he rode forth, a large army flocked joyfully to meet him. Besides the Russians, there were his old warriors, the Ijora men

and other tribes from Lake Ladoga. He led them back there straightway. He defeated the Germans and razed their new fortress to the ground. He delivered judgment on all traitors and sent many prisoners to Novgorod.

Then the shout was raised again: "Alexander Nevski is with us! We cannot fail so long as Nevski rules! Blessed is he, bravest and wisest in all the world!"

He went on and occupied all approaches to Pskov, then captured the city itself from the Germans and restored order. He seemed indeed invincible. Throughout Russia he was the only man with a triumphant fame equal to that of the Mongols. In the bloody welter of Europe, he stood forth as a young paladin of patriotism, a military genius, without a stain of ferocity on his name.

But the Germans were not yet entirely crushed. Still the Livonian knights stood firm and threatened that no Slav should withstand the Teuton power. The Bishop of Riga would bring his Cross Bearers. The King of Denmark would send assistance. And this vainglorious Nevski should be taken alive to serve as a spectacle.

He marched out of Pskov to meet his assailants. A small detachment of his men, foraging in advance, was instantly annihilated. He turned aside to a huge frozen lake and there prepared for battle. His army, reinforced by troops from Novgorod, brought by Andrei, was a large one. But greater than its numbers was its faith in him.

"Nevski has had communion with the saints! He is himself a saint. The day has come when we can give our lives for him and for the cause of Holy Russia!"

It was Sunday, as it had been on the Neva, but the season was early spring. At dawn, the army was marshalled on the ice, with banners flying and priests ready to confer a blessing. Alexander led a solemn prayer:

"Judge, O God, and give sentence between us and our haughty opponents. O give us not to suffer from the noisy tongue!"

And, as they prayed thus, the enemy host was seen advancing over the black frozen surface, which rumbled beneath their tread, in a terrible wedge formation, bristling with levelled spears, that would surely break the stoutest ranks. Alexander knew that one regiment must thus be broken by sheer weight of numbers.

But even as it happened, he shouted gaily: "See, how they come, snouted like a pig! Shall not we take this pig in the side, fellow huntsmen?"

A roar of enthusiasm answered him and the flank attack that he led was so violent that the rear of the wedge was bent and disorganised.

The wedge reformed and was again penetrated. Many Russians there had heard how the Mongols in their attack on Ryazan had spoken, brutally enough, of "driving the pig in," meaning that the defenders of the city would be herded together for slaughter. Now Alexander's happy comparison of

the enemy's wedge to a pig's snout inspired them with a sense of revenge against that other unknown enemy. They felt that they were not only fighting the hated Nemtsy, but all other powers of evil. Once let their might be established here and it should be proved later against the Mongols. Not they would be the pig then, but, as hunters of the pig, they would show their prowess and prevail.

The fighting was, according to the Chronicle, "stubborn and very venomous. The rattle of breaking lances and the clashing of swords was as if a frozen sea had broken its ice and was in furious conflict with the pieces." In fact, none knew that the hard surface of the lake was not splitting beneath their feet, for it cracked and rumbled continually with thunderous reports and soon it was awash with blood. More than four hundred famous German knights fell that day and many were taken prisoners. Their army was utterly routed and chased for miles over the snow-covered country. The battle was known long after as "The Ice Slaughter."

Once more the victory of Alexander was complete. First Pskov, "the younger brother," came forth to acclaim him with ikons and banners. And when he had stayed there a short time to join in rejoicing and thanksgiving, Novgorod again implored him to return. He was willing enough now to accede to the request. There could be no further question of his authority, for his fame would be known throughout Europe. So widely indeed would it be known that the Pope, already in treaty with Daniel

of Galitch, would soon be seeking Alexander's alliance. But of this he was as yet unaware.

He yearned for Novgorod only, as for his native city, and knew besides that he must there receive envoys from the Teutonic Order, when they came to sue for peace.

The streets were snowy as he rode in at the head of his troops and the welcome he received was even more frantic than it had been after the battle of the Neva.

His mother, Feodosia, dignified and glowing with pride, had driven out to meet him. With her in the royal sledge was Alexandra, plump and placid like a domestic bird, and soon to have another child; also the infant prince Vassili in the arms of an attendant lady. This sledge followed the army's processional entry to the city, in the company of mounted boyars and other sledges containing the notabilities of Novgorod.

After the troops had been dismissed, a ceremonial of welcome was held in the Court of Yaroslav, that great square overlooked by the Tower and the cathedral of Holy Wisdom, built long ago by the Law-Giver, son and successor of Vladimir I. The bell that usually summoned all popular assemblies was sounding now and the square was packed with equipages and people, as Alexander and his staff appeared to hear the address that would be read out by the posadnik.

Among the sledges of the wealthier citizens one might have been remarked for the gaiety rather

than the importance of its occupants. Its appointments were rich and its two sleek horses were driven, apparently for a joke, by a fashionably dressed young man, who turned in his seat from time to time, to talk and laugh with the group behind him. The centre of this group and obviously the point of attraction was a lovely lady, wrapped in a cloak of black sable. At each side of her sat another young boyar and at her feet a third, all of whom were evidently bent on enjoying her society. Their careless gallantry and the infectious merriment of the whole party created a lively picture of pleasure.

The lady, however, seemed rather concentrated on the occasion. Impartial in her favours, she held a large bunch of purple violets on her lap and, when the address had been read, she leant forward eagerly to hear Alexander's few words of answer.

Then, while the crowd shouted and swayed with enthusiasm, she stood up and threw her violets so neatly that they fell on the pommel of Alexander's saddle.

He raised and smelt them, turned, saw her and bowed a smiling acknowledgment. A moment later, he handed the flowers to a boyar at his side, with the direction to present them to the Princess Alexandra.

Afterwards, he rode away to his palace, accompanied by his officers and followed by the sledges containing the royal family and their retinue. The lady of the violets, who had attracted some attention by her action, was also driven off in triumph

by her friends in another direction. And gradually the crowd dispersed from the Court of Yaroslav.

"Did you perchance observe the fair flower-thrower, my prince?" inquired the boyar who had passed the violets on to Alexander's wife.

"It was a pretty compliment," replied Nevski. "I have not been in the way of seeing spring blossoms of late. Who is she?"

"She is known in Novgorod, sir, as Vassilissa Ivanovna."

"I do not remember the name. A person of consequence?"

"Hardly that. You would not, of course, have met her at court. She was the mistress of a friend of mine, one Churilo Plenkovich, a boyar of Kiev. He had a great passion for her and when he died last year, it was extremely amusing, he left her all his fortune and bequeathed to his relations nothing but an heirloom of small value—an umbrella."

"The lady, then, is well provided for?"

"Admirably. And since she is very pleasing besides, she has become all the rage in her own set. She is like honey to a swarm of bees. Men vie with each other for invitations to her house."

"And has she smiled on you, my good Pyotr?"

"Not so warmly as I would have wished, prince. Yet nothing would flatter her more than if you would deign to visit her in my company."

Alexander laughed and shook his head.

"Every one understands the need of relaxation after such a campaign as yours, sir," whispered

Pyotr urgently. "Assuredly there would be no chance of scandal. The matter could be arranged with the greatest ease. The lady, herself, already solicits your favour. She makes no secret of the fact that her heart was given to you long ago."

"I rejoice in the love of all my people," answered Alexander simply. "The harlot Vassilissa Ivanovna can be nothing to me."

"Forgive me, prince, I did not mean——"

"To tempt me? No, friend. The bait and its purpose were too apparent. We Russians are said to love easily. In my own case, I have not found it so. A kindred soul, ay! there might be an object for passion. But women like this one do not have such souls. They have only bodies."

He gazed ahead with the stern eyes of youth. His slender figure, his small shapely head, with its classic features and short crisp beard, gave him the aspect of some poetic hero, whose dream was service and whose god was duty. He believed that he was ripe in experience. He imagined that he had known love with Alexandra, with his mother and with his infant son.

But the boyar Pyotr, who was gregarious and susceptible, looked at him and reflected: "God send that when the blessed innocent falls into the hands of a woman something warmer than his wife, she may be no worse than Vassilissa Ivanovna."

XII

PRINCE ANDREI, the brother of Alexander, was a fair but boastful youth, braver in the absence of an enemy than in an enemy's presence. He regarded the small folk of Novgorod as beneath his notice and was well hated by them. He often spoke of the distant Tartars as savages, inferior even to the pagan Chuds.

"If I could lead an army against this Batu Khan," he said, "I would soon drive him and his demons back to hell."

"Yet they are stronger than any Polovtsi," said Alexander. "See what our father writes of them," and he showed Yaroslav's second letter to Andrei.

"Our father seems to have lost his senses," said Andrei. "How can he praise our enemies and accept favours from them?"

"It has been done before," answered Alexander dryly. "And notably in the days of our ancestors, when they were sometimes arrayed against and sometimes allied with the Polovtsi."

Then news of Yaroslav's death in Mongolia came suddenly from Batu to Novgorod. And with it the command that whichever of Yaroslav's sons had at that time ruled Novgorod should present himself at Sarai to pay allegiance. The son was not named, for Batu did not know his name.

"It is for you to go, brother," said Andrei, the coward at heart. "You are the elder and it is you who rule at Novgorod now."

"There is something to be learned from this message," said Alexander. "Hitherto, they have believed us subject to Vladimir. Now they command us as an independent state. They have realised the freedom of Novgorod. If Novgorod is to remain free, it must not be represented as a vassal. If you go, I am not responsible. You, who were ruling when our father died and now have no authority, must go to placate and mislead Batu."

"It is infamous," said Andrei. "They will not be deceived. They will murder me also. I believe you are afraid."

"I am not afraid," said Alexander, "and you know it. I have sworn to protect Novgorod and here I shall remain to do it, until I am forced to ride out and protect her further. Play the man, Andrei; make what false promises you like to these enemies, and they may yet be delivered into our hands."

Then Andrei went, feeling himself an important figure and vowing vengeance against the Mongols.

Time passed, and no message came back from him. And Alexander, convinced that he had sent Andrei to his death, shuddered, but felt bound to remain at Novgorod.

He found little comfort in his family. His mother, Feodosia, was preparing to take the veil, so that in the peace of a nunnery she might pray till the end of her days to be reunited to Yaroslav. The Princess Alexandra looked wistfully in Feodosia's direction. Meanwhile she spoiled her fretful little son, Vassili, nursed the last-born infant,

named after brother Andrei, and prepared to have a third child.

War on the western frontier, with all its good fellowship, was over for the time and there was no peace in Alexander's soul.

He sat in the great white oaken hall of his palace and listened to the Slav musicians playing softly on their stringed instruments and singing sadly the old ballad:

"Whence, O Sorrow, is thy origin?
She was born, was Sorrow, from grey earth,
From under the stones that are grey,
From under the briars, the clay clods.
And Sorrow shod her in shoes of bast,
And Sorrow clad her in clothes of rushes,
Apparelled her in a thin bast waist band,
And Sorrow approached the goodly champion."

There watched him, Cyril, the Bishop of Rostov, who had been Yaroslav's friend and adviser at Vladimir and had now come to Novgorod at Alexander's request. A wise man was Bishop Cyril, with his gentle face, lined with thought, and his long soft beard whitened with suffering.

"How deep is the trouble of youth," reflected Cyril. "How deep and how present, without the patience to endure that only comes with years. And if age seeks to give consolation, youth cannot believe because it does not know. And if youth seeks to act, age counsels caution, because itself is feeble. Which is the greater trial, for age to look on powerless or for youth to find its own salvation?"

At last another message came from Batu Khan to Novgorod:

"Since Alexander is ruling now, does not he know that God has subjected to me many kingdoms and peoples? Will he be alone in opposing my lordship? If he will preserve his lands intact and uninjured, let him come hither to Sarai, to look at my rule in its glory and honour."

"I should have gone the first time, and Andrei should not have been sacrificed," cried Alexander. "Nothing can be hidden from this man. We played for time to save Novgorod, but already his hand is upon the place. Now there is nothing to be done."

"Prince Andrei is not mentioned. He may not be dead," said the boyars.

"Living or dead, I will go and find him," said Alexander, while all protested that, if he went to his own death, Novgorod was lost indeed. "The time has come for me to follow in my father's footsteps," he answered with shining eyes, "and in the footsteps of Michael of Chernigov."

For, by now, they had learned also of the dreadful fate of that old man, whereby he was considered a holy martyr. And the pitiable plight of Daniel of Galitch, halting between Papal promises and Mongol power, was no secret to them.

But though it is easy to feel and speak boldly in a moment of grief and enthusiasm, Alexander was too intelligent not to quail inwardly at the thought of the ordeal that he must face. How should his

honour escape at Sarai, even if life were left to him? Might not he be flattered into a sense of false security, as Yaroslav had been? Was he strong enough to resist torture for his faith should the need arise? And in that case, who would remain to protect Novgorod? In his agony of mind, he turned to Bishop Cyril.

"Father, tell me what I should do, for I can trust my own courage no longer and I have no wisdom."

"My son," said Cyril, "when the heart is empty of self, God enters into it. And the guidance of God is simple. He shows the way and you have only to take it, without effort. If the road leads to a sudden end of this life, be assured it will be no less clear. If death can be honourably avoided, you will see how to continue."

He smiled cheerfully and blessed Alexander, then made as though to add a word and hesitated.

"Tell me, O my father. Your advice is precious to me."

"You have asked," said Cyril, "and I speak, not as an old man, who has experienced much, not even as a churchman, for I think that the spirit of our Lord is not always in the faith we profess. But as one in whom adventurous desire persists, despite these grey hairs, as one to whom Christ always appears as Life personified, I give you this hard saying: To be strong, you must submit; to conquer, you must yield. This is the greater courage and this the truth."

"I have heard that saying, when I was a child,"

answered Alexander, "but I did not guess then how hard it was."

§

His druzhina, or bodyguard of intimate friends, were to accompany him to Sarai and, during his absence, the extent of which no one could tell, his young son Vassili, under the tutelage of Alexandra, Cyril and various boyars, would be the nominal figure-head of Novgorod.

Among the druzhina was the boyar Pyotr, who had once attempted, after the battle of the Ice Slaughter, to interest Alexander in the woman Vassilissa Ivanovna. Her name had not since been mentioned at court, nor did Alexander know whether Pyotr had ever succeeded in winning her favour. Pyotr was a faithful fellow and, if Alexander considered his private affairs at all, he welcomed the chance of removing his friend from the enervating influence of city life.

The little company rode out with their carts laden with personal baggage and tributes for the Mongols. And again crowds lined the streets, this time to watch them go and to speed them with their prayers and tears. Men and women knelt in the dusty road and wept aloud to see Alexander pass, perhaps to his death. The church bells tolled as though for a funeral procession and there were no flags or flowers displayed and there was no golden lady sitting at a window, nibbling sunflower seeds and smiling.

They were to go down the river Volga to Sarai, because, in the disturbed and desolate state of the country, this route, though far longer than overland, was the best way. They would probably embark on the Great Water, which is the Volga's Finnish name, where the town of Tver now stands and where at this time, in an atmosphere of brooding melancholy, there was nothing but the ruin that the Mongols had left.

Here, the barges that would carry them eastward and southward, either with large brown sails, spread to any favourable wind or with towing ropes, pulled from the bank, were loaded with the baggage from the carts. And here, on a misty summer evening, as this work was finishing, Alexander noticed a boy, sitting high on a bale in the stern of one of the barges, cross-legged, like a figure of Pan, and with something wild and elfin in his pose, against the yellow light of the western sky. As he sat there, he plucked the strings of a guzli and sang the words of the old ballad:

"He saw her, the champion, and must escape her.
And fled from Sorrow to the open meadow,
To the open meadow like a grey clad hare,
And Sorrow followed him.
She tracked him out and stretched her meshes
Stretching her meshes, her silken fetters:
'Stand and deliver, avaunt not champion!' "

Alexander shivered, but his dread passed in a moment and he called aloud: "Hola! there, boy, who are you?"

The boy turned, saw him and, snatching off his cloth cap, stood upright on the bale and cried back: "God save your honour! I am only the servant of Pyotr Yegorovich, who goes with you to the Tartars."

"You are too young to be taken on such a journey," said Alexander. "He should not have chosen you and I did not know."

"I am older than I look, if you please, my lord," replied the boy, "and the boyar, Pyotr, cannot do without me. Wherefore, I pray you, let me share his adventure and go with you."

There was the softness of immaturity in the lad's outline and in his speech. His black cropped hair and his round pale face made him look like an overgrown child.

Alexander was touched by his obvious devotion to his master. He shrugged his shoulders, muttered, "So be it!" and walked away.

But later, he blamed Pyotr for taking so young an attendant and warned him that he should hold himself responsible for the boy's safety.

"What, after all, prince, is one servant more or less?" answered Pyotr jovially. "The fellow's only value is that he loves me."

"Then he should stand the higher in your regard," said Alexander. "Poor waif, I suppose he has no home or people of his own and has attached himself to you like a lost dog. Yet Heaven has favoured him with a sweet voice."

He was to hear that voice again. As they floated

through the rural scenery beyond Tver, between fields and forests and the blackened remains of burned villages, the boatmen sang dreamily:

"Down the river Volga,
The great stretch of water,
Flies the bird of fire
The fairy King's daughter,
But up stream, a-ha! Witch Baba Yaga
Sweeps the skies, as she flies,
On her mortar."

Strange wild song of the Volga boatmen, telling the traditional legends of the country. Yet stranger still was the plaintive lilt that sounded again from the stern of one of the barges:

"He saw her, the youth, and must escape her,
And from Sorrow he fled to the swift-flowing river,
To the rushing river, like the pike fish,
And Sorrow followed him.
She tracked him out, her nets she cast,
Stretching her nets, the silken fetters:
'Stand and deliver, nor go, thou champion.'"

So, with a haunting persistence, the boy gave forth the words of the old ballad. Till Alexander began to listen for them and to feel, whenever he heard them, that he was pursued by a relentless fate.

He did not speak to the boy again, nor did he often see him, for, however well he may have served Pyotr, these duties seemed to keep him in the background and Pyotr himself appeared careless of the boy's welfare.

They passed the city of Nizni Novgorod, which had escaped the Mongols, as it was only maintained to oppose the aggressions of the Finno-Turkish Bulgars on the eastern frontier, now subject to Batu Khan. At Kazan they came among these Tartar people, with their veiled women and swarthy Mohammedan pedlars, and landed to obtain supplies of food. Grain was plentiful from the cornfields that edged the banks, but below Kazan this fertile country gave place to dense forests and the Volga was studded with small islands.

The journey, with its variety of scene, and its soothing monotony of progress, must in glorious summer weather have been a sheer delight, an escape from gnawing anxiety and cares of state, but for the knowledge that this beauty, this peace, was only a road leading surely to the pains of hell.

No merciful Creator, thought Alexander, at times, could so torture mankind with the loveliness of the earth, wedding him to its charms till his first instinct was that of self-preservation, only to rob him of its fruits and leave him to despair.

The river took a sharp eastward bend and here, in the deep gorges and ravines of the cragged woody heights of one bank, the enemies of God and man, pirates and brigands, were wont to seek refuge. Supposing he and his druzhina were to join them and thus wage war on the Mongols? It might happen (and he little knew that later, when Polish oppression caused soldier settlers to become lawless bands of Cossacks in this region, it did

happen) that such a force of refugees might maintain independence against the powerful enemy.

But he cast the idea from him. Not there lay honour, nor the safety of Novgorod which he was pledged to defend.

On floated the barges, between high chalk cliffs and the famous Serpent Hills of Samara. On and on, with the river gradually widening till it was two miles broad and, on its calm sea-like expanse, further and larger islands appeared.

Except for these flat islands, there was nothing but the vista of sky and water, with the level line of the steppes on each horizon—those open rolling steppes, which are themselves the dried bed of an infinitely ancient sea remaining in the Caspian. Here was no scenery to distract the mind, here were no earthly beauties to fetter the soul. But here was space like eternity and the fulness of life. . . .

And here, as they neared the shore and saw the beehive-shaped felt tents of the Mongols in the foreground and the walled city of Sarai rising in the near distance, was the peace of God in the knowledge of duty done and still to do.

XIII

THE great city of Sarai was still in course of construction when Alexander first beheld it. Its innumerable streets were already planned and paved and already the aqueduct, that would stretch for two miles to carry sweet water from a distant lake to its reservoirs and bath-houses, was raised. But its splendid palaces, among which that of Batu would be the most magnificent, were yet being built and the Christian church, in a quarter that was to be devoted to Russian use, was not completed.

Little did Alexander guess, as he saw with amazement order thus imposed on chaos, that a city, mightier than any he knew, would last for a few centuries only, and would then fall into such complete decay, that for ages its very existence in the past would not be suspected. And yet this was no stranger than that the time would come, when his own country, to which all Europe at present looked in hope or fear, should be so forgotten that a European map of only one hundred years later showed the whole of Russia a blank space. So puny are the efforts of man in the eternal wild. So self-centred may man be, that he can altogether disregard his fellows.

But of all men that he had ever seen, these Mongols seemed to Alexander, who looked on them with the eye of a commander of men, highly fitted to endure. They had the aspect, not so much of barbarians, as of creatures in whom adventure had

bred a hardiness, a freedom, that was the very character of their steppes. They were so acquainted with the supreme law of Nature, that they were hardly human, yet their quality only appeared bestial in so far as it resembled the easy strength of animals. Even the rugged ugliness of their features, their stunted figures and their bow legs, were not altogether frightful. For, as they welcomed Alexander and his suite, there was honesty rather than ferocity in their shrewd slit eyes and geniality rather than enmity in the words they spoke.

They seemed inseparable from their small sturdy horses and awkward except in the saddle, where they rode with short stirrups and loose rein as though born to that position. They had brought mounts for the Russians to the landing stage and very soon conducted them to the tents that had been set apart for their use.

Alexander was occupying his yurt and finding it not uncomfortable, with its rich interior hangings, its couch of furs and its glowing brazier, when the leather door-flap was lifted and his brother Andrei stood in the entrance. They embraced and Alexander could not conceal his joy.

"O little brother, I thought you dead. Tell me at once how they have treated you. Have you suffered?"

"Except from the company of these savages, not at all. They show me the highest honour and defer to me in all things, which is only right." Andrei was more self-important than ever.

"They flattered our father equally," said Alexander. "What do they want in return?"

"Nothing that I shall give them, except a false allegiance. I speak them soft, but with you I need make no secret of my contempt."

"Contempt is hardly what they earn," said Alexander thoughtfully. "A deep, silent hatred, ay, we can feel that for our father's murderers, our country's despoilers." He clenched his hands. "O Andrei, it ill behoves us to accept any favours from such people. If they deceive us, it is we who are to be despised. If they are honest with us, for God's sake, let us be honest with them and look them straightly in the eyes and say: 'We are your enemies and you are ours, but let not that prevent respect.' "

"I play for safety," said Andrei sulkily. "Here I have a good choice of riding horses, plenty to eat and drink and, among the Mongols, there are plenty of fair women. One might do worse than settle among them. But you need not fear. I am no traitor to my country. I do not forget what our enemy has done. I only wait the chance to rouse the northern country against them. And, after all, I have only followed your advice. Did not you say that I should mislead them with promises, to save Novgorod?"

"It is useless," said Alexander. "I did not then know that I should have to come. I did not realise what we are dealing with. Diplomacy may still be possible, but, if we attempt to snare them, we

shall be caught in our own net. Not Novgorod now, but all Russia is at stake."

"You would not pledge Novgorod?" said Andrei, aghast.

"Is it still ours to pledge? It must be saved, that I have sworn, and to save it, I will sacrifice all but my honour."

Batu Khan received Alexander in a large pavilion, decorated with multi-coloured felt, and surmounted with floating banners. At the entrance, Nevski was warned by attendants that he must on no account touch the ropes that stayed the tent or step upon the threshold.

"What is this law?" he replied, holding back. "If it is in deference to your gods, I go no further." And he thought of how Michael of Chernigov had met death.

"It has nothing to do with the worship of Heaven and earth, prince," said the Mongol officer. "It is merely a mark of respect for our Khan. You may surely afford that amount of courtesy."

"We Russians," said Alexander proudly, "are always ready to learn new forms of etiquette, enjoined by good manners."

He folded his arms, stepped carefully into the pavilion and found himself before the conqueror of Europe. The implacable black eyes of one of the greatest soldiers the world has ever known met the stern blue eyes of a fellow-soldier. Alexander saw a man whose strength he suddenly and most surprisingly felt that he could trust; a man who had

ravaged his country in war and yet was capable of just and wise government in times of peace; a man who had behaved like a barbarian and still was master of all lesser men. Batu saw a young captain of hosts, whom he would have been proud to enlist in his service, a knight whose chivalry was surely greater than that of any Pole or German he had fought, a hero whose glory was widely known.

And Batu rose, and said gravely:

"Your fame has preceded you, Nevski. You are welcome here. We could be friends, you and I."

Alexander bowed with dignity and answered: "I have come in obedience to your summons, O Batu Khan. Between us there can be no love. But I am willing to serve my country and you as a mediator."

For a moment, Batu looked amazed and wrathful, then his swarthy face was lightened with geniality.

"By Heaven," he cried, turning to his assembled officers, "I have not met a man to touch this Alexander Nevski—nay, in all the world there can be none to compare with him!"

§

On closer acquaintance, Batu proved to be older and more wearied with his terrific campaign than he had at first sight appeared. His qualities were still gigantic, but he was undoubtedly becoming aware of the approach of an enemy stronger even than himself, the enemy of advancing years.

He made no further obvious effort to flatter

Alexander, but, what was more significant in a man of his judgment, he took every opportunity to keep Alexander beside him and to offer explanations and confidences, as though he desired Alexander's approval.

Thus he volunteered that there would be no need, in Nevski's case, for the customary ceremony of passing between blazing fires.

"That ceremony," he said, "on which our people usually insist is due to the fear of witchcraft. But we are well assured that you would not attempt to do us harm. Michael of Chernigov had boasted that he could withstand us with a certain magic sign."

"That I believe to be a false report," answered Alexander firmly.

"Possibly," said Batu, "but when Michael refused to be tested by the ceremony, it leant colour to the suspicion and I could not save him. I ask you at least to believe that I made every effort to save him."

Alexander inclined his head. "O Michael, holy martyr and saint," he thought, "forgive me if I seem to doubt your wisdom."

"I admired your father, Yaroslav," said Batu another time.

"We will not discuss my father," replied Alexander.

"You are right. I have no wish to talk of my father either—or of the great Chingiz." Batu's eyes twinkled as he spoke. "But, lest you think

that I sent Yaroslav willingly to death, hear this: I, even I, was powerless against the command from the home land that all vassals should be sent there. Now, though I would rather keep you than I ever wanted to keep Yaroslav, I may be forced to despatch you also."

"I am ready to follow in my father's footsteps."

"That is well spoken. And you are young. It should be a great experience for you. . . . You do not fear death or hardship. Your brother, Andrei, would have to go with you."

Alexander blenched. "Is that unavoidable? Andrei is younger than I, less inured to danger. And he has already been here a long time."

"He has not half your worth. Experience will be all the better for him. Probably no harm will come to either of you. I shall send with you a strong escort. There was a woman at the bottom of Yaroslav's death, Kuyuk's mother, Turakina. And now they say she is near her end."

"I shall discover my father's murderer."

"I would not blame you. Turakina had a favourite witch-woman, and if she were responsible, any Mongol would help you to take revenge."

"I shall remember," said Alexander. Then hesitating, he added: "If Andrei and I are absent at the same time, who will hold Novgorod under your suzerainty?"

"Whoever you have left there," said Batu, grinning. "But look you, Nevski, it is understood that Novgorod, which, in you, acknowledges our

supremacy, is itself under Vladimir, which we conquered and took. I have now given the rule of Vladimir to your father's brother, Sviatoslav, who will surely keep an eye on Novgorod. When you and Andrei return here, we shall see whether this plan is successful or whether some change will be better."

Alexander could not but feel that there was generosity in Batu's treatment. Certainly, in leaving the control of northern Russia in the hands of Yaroslav's family, Batu showed himself a man to be trusted. Perhaps, though the idea was hateful, Batu was actually more trustworthy than the family. For he knew well that Uncle Sviatoslav was a weakling, by none less loved than by that truculent boy, plucky Michael, Alexander's youngest brother, who remained at Vladimir. Supposing these unreliable relatives should quarrel, how would Batu deal with them?

"O Christ, guide me aright! O sainted father Yaroslav, strengthen me to follow! O blessed martyr of Chernigov, grant me not to yield!"

His anxiety for his country, rather than any dread of adventure, caused him to look forward to the journey to Mongolia and the long absence it would probably entail with gloomy forebodings. Without his protection, how would Novgorod be immune, and without the restraining influence which unconsciously but undoubtedly he exerted at Sarai, how would Batu act? He was, on the whole, relieved that Andrei was to accompany him.

Andrei, who had not hesitated to accept favours from Batu, seemed only desirous now of proving his independence to Alexander, by proclaiming his hatred of the Mongols and his anger at any necessity for submission.

"Is it possible," he raged, when the brothers were alone together, "that we are to be for ever friendly with these pagans and serve them? Better leave all and escape to other countries."

"There is no escape," said Alexander, "and we must go further, you and I, to their own country."

At that Andrei, who had no wish to exchange the comforts of Sarai for a long and perilous journey to the unknown steppes of Central Asia, was more furious than ever, vowed that he would prefer to die on the spot and accused Alexander of a feeble spirit.

"You will be safer going with me," said Alexander dryly, "than remaining here and continuing to abuse our conquerors."

"Doubtless," said Andrei with malice. "Everyone knows that you are Batu's favourite."

But he quailed and beat a hasty retreat as Alexander took a step towards him, with clenched hand and flashing eyes.

The preparations for their departure went forward and they soon learned that no druzhina of Russian boyars would go with them. They were to go, not as reigning princes, but as vassals of the Great Khan, and a Mongol escort was considered sufficient for their needs. Again Andrei was bit-

terly resentful, but Alexander was thankful that his friends were not obliged to imperil their lives. It would be sad to part with Pyotr Yegorovich and other good fellows, who had companioned him so far. Yet Pyotr and the rest seemed to have settled down at Sarai, in extraordinary contentment, growing more familiar with the Mongols every day. And he heard that, in Mongolia, he would not be among strangers, for many Russians and other Europeans were already living there. In fact, but for the arduous journey, with exile at the end of it, this Mongol homeland from all accounts must be a desirable country.

It amazed him, nevertheless, that his compatriots (even Andrei, before his own arrival necessitated self-assertion) should so soon be ready to mingle with the enemy and adopt the enemy's mode of life. Had they no pride? Were novelty and amusement their only aims in life? He had seen Pyotr at a feast, happily intoxicated on fermented mare's milk, calling a neighbouring Mongol "brother" and affectionately agreeing to learn, next day, the Mongol art of wrestling. The baggage servants of his druzhina were hail-fellow-well-met with half the horsemen in the great encampment.

There was a group of soldiers teaching that dark-haired lad of Pyotr's—the lad who had sung so sweetly on the barge—how to ride. The boy was awkward, he had probably never been mounted before, but he had pluck. No sooner was he up, and the horse broke into a canter, than he rolled

off, all waving arms and legs. But whenever this happened, to the accompaniment of roars of laughter from his tutors, he leapt to his feet, rushed to the first horse standing by and somehow scrambled back into the saddle.

"Sit forward and low," yelled the Mongols. "Don't hold on by the rein. Grip him well with your knees. The stirrups are short enough."

"His thighs are as round as a woman's," chuckled others. "He'll never learn to grip with them."

"Yet our women can ride astride as well as any man. Stick to it, boy! Ha! There he goes again."

The lad's forehead was bleeding from a fall on the rough ground, but his pale lips were set and he looked wildly round for another horse as Alexander approached him.

"You are hurt," said Alexander gently. "Better not try again to-day."

"It is great sport, your honour," said the boy rather faintly. "And I must learn to ride if I am to stay with you."

At that moment, a Mongol brought up a quiet old piebald mare, hoisted the boy into the saddle and led him away at a trot.

Alexander was left wondering what the lad's last words had meant. That same evening, he was informed.

As he sat alone in his tent studying a strange map of the period, that was intended to show the eastern route he would soon traverse, Pyotr's boy suddenly entered and stood boldly before him.

Alexander looked up, scanned the robust young figure and noted the dark hair, matted with dirt, and the marks of dried blood on the pale cheek.

"Well," he said, "what do you want?"

"Your honour, forgive me. There is something I must ask you. You are going away?"

"Ay. Prince Andrei and I have to go to the Mongol homeland. What of it?"

"Take me with you, my lord."

Alexander smiled. "You do not understand. Your master, Pyotr Yegorovich, will not go with us."

"Pyotr Yegorovich is no master of mine," said the boy quickly.

"What is this? You told me long since—"

"He was. He has set me free, my lord. I am no longer his serf. He is happy here! He wishes to remain. I wish to go with you."

"But it is impossible. None are to go besides ourselves and the Mongol escort."

"Your honour, hear me for one little moment. Take me as your servant—your slave—they could not deny you that. I am accustomed to hard service. I can be of use to you. The Tartars themselves would choose to have me. They regard me as something to amuse them."

"You do not understand," said Alexander again. "You are too young for such a long and hard journey."

"When we started, my lord, you thought me too young. I am older now and none the worse."

The boy's voice broke. He was obviously over-

strung and tired out. He knelt at Alexander's feet and hid his face against a raised arm.

"O take me," he said, "for the love of Christ, take me, or I am undone."

"Be quiet, boy. I tell you, it is impossible. What ails you? This is a fair place and you have found friends. But if you will, I can ask that you be sent back to Novgorod. Is that what you want?"

"Nay, my lord, I beseech you."

"And you are not happy here?"

"Nay, my lord, if I stay here, they will end by enlisting me against our own land."

"Ah!" said Alexander thoughtfully. "So you would not like to serve the Mongols?"

"I would rather die than serve the enemies of Holy Russia. Alexander Yaroslavovich, save me from certain death here by allowing me to risk death with you."

"Strange courage," muttered Alexander, and added, "Boy, I do not even know your name."

The lad looked into his eyes. "Call me Mikula, your honour."

"Well, Mikula, be reasonable. There is no need for such as you to die either here or with me. Since you are my countryman, I will ask the Khan to send you home."

"I have no home, my lord. I am from Novgorod —true, but I have been a slave there, since childhood. I am of the muzhik class, your honour. My people had a farmstead in the south. It was burned when the princes were fighting each other

and I was carried away to the north. In free Novgorod, I was never free. But I cannot forget freedom and the grey earth that I love. My name is Mikula, and is not Mikula, the peasant, the soul of Holy Russia?"

"You are right," said Alexander.

He was infinitely touched. He realised that this enslaved boy represented the enduring power of the muzhiks, whose patriotism was founded on a pure devotion to the land which they knew so intimately. To possess that land, they would suffer all things. That precious land, which they had regarded as their own, since as Slav settlers from the Carpathians they had first reclaimed it, was for them sacred; while, for the ruling class, it was merely a set of principalities, empty of any value but personal gain. The patriots of Russia were not the princes, through whose quarrels so many peasants had been ruined and such disaster had followed, but the muzhiks themselves, who had fought only against Nature and to defend their fields. And the spirit of the muzhiks survived in this poor waif, so aptly named Mikula, after Russia's peasant hero, who, helpless now, looked to him for protection.

"If Batu Khan consents, you shall go with me, Mikula," he said gently. "Tell me, have you known no love but that of our land, in all your short life?"

The boy bowed his head and laid his cheek against Alexander's foot. "Only my love for you, Alexander Yaroslavovich," he whispered.

XIV

BATU at once gave consent that Alexander should take the boy, Mikula, with him as a personal servant.

The day came when they were ready to depart with the Mongol escort on that long journey, which would take many months by the route that connected the Golden Horde with their eastern homeland. They would ride the whole way and fresh horses would be constantly provided for their use, except through the desert tracts of Turkestan. And they would take only one covered cart, to carry two small tents of felt with bamboo frameworks and a supply of provisions, consisting mainly of dried milk.

In the crowd that collected to speed them, the figure of the boyar Pyotr was prominent. He knelt first at Alexander's feet and then at Andrei's and kissed their hands with tears pouring down his face. Afterwards, he embraced Mikula on both cheeks, laughing rather hysterically, and thereupon turned to a buxom Mongol maiden who stood near by and wept on her shoulder.

"Be comforted, good Pyotr Yegorovich," cried Mikula. "I will never forget you!"

"We will comfort him, never fear," shouted the girl's brothers uproariously. "Don't forget how to ride, Mikula."

They were off at last, cantering across the wide dun-coloured expanse of clay soil and feather grass,

that borders the Caspian Sea. The season was summer, when moisture fails and the steppes lose the full beauty of their vegetation. The earth was dry and cracked and the air was laden with dust, raised by a warm wind. No bird notes were to be heard, as in spring-time, when quails, corncrakes and nightingales abound. In fact, there were no sounds but the beating of the horses' hooves and the perpetual whisper of scorched weeds. By day, the horizon was shrouded in lilac-tinted mist and, as night descended, this horizon seemed to stretch to eternity, in a pale darkness, as at sea. It was inexpressibly lovely, mysterious and melancholy, and Alexander felt that he was riding out, like some champion of old, through a faery land of dreams to some fearful but remote trial.

The Mongols were practical but unimaginative companions and Andrei was depressed and sullen. But nothing, apparently, could quench the gay spirits of Mikula, who, glowing with health and vitality, was like a child who has gained a long-desired wish. At times, riding immediately behind Alexander, he burst into song and the words of another old ballad sounded strangely in that waste:

"Hail to thee, Mikula the villager!
Thou hadst once a filly yclept
'Lift-up-thy-head!'
She lifted her head high above cloud-land

Once he was in the city of Kiev,
Carried off two wallets of salt,
Into each of the wallets he put
Of salt a hundred-weight."

The Mongols beat time to the song and grunted their approval. And before many days, they sang with Mikula, who somehow contrived to teach them another verse:

"Very soon, Mikulushka tilled and ploughed,
(Ha! he tilled and ploughed!)
Spruces and fir trees into furrows he flung,
Harvested rye and garnered it home,
Garnered it home, threshed it at home."

And, sitting round a camp fire at night, they would begin again:

"I will brew me my beer and give my guests cheer,
I will swill to the full and Mikula extol,
For thine it was Mikulushka to plough and to till,
Thy life it was, Mikulushka, a peasant's!"

The boy seemed to have an extraordinary faculty, derived, perhaps, from muzhik ancestry, of adapting himself to circumstances. He was a simple, genial creature and had not boasted when he said that he was capable of amusing the Mongols.

The hard-bitten horsemen who formed the escort regarded him partly as a child who deserved their care (for, like all Orientals, they loved children) and partly as a companion, who had a certain affinity with their most cherished beliefs. For although Mikula was to a certain extent deeply religious and never failed to pray every day in company with Alexander and Andrei or to appeal devoutly to Christ, he was, at the same time, a pagan at heart. It was obvious that he instinc-

tively appreciated the Mongol worship of Heaven and still more their worship of earth. Land and water, for him, as for them, were possessed by spirits which he deeply revered. The barrows of nomad chieftains and the monoliths of stone which they passed in the steppe were for him, as for them, sacred.

Moreover, in spite of his devotion to Alexander, his patriotism and his keen sense of duty, he appeared to have no moral sense. If any opportunity offered to steal food from his companions for the benefit of his master or himself, he took it, and escaped chastisement with easy tears and lies. At the same time, he was something of a prude in his habits and yet, like the Mongols, refused ever to wash his person or to divest himself of his clothing.

"Dirty young devil," complained Andrei. "At the first stream we reach, he deserves to be thrown in headlong."

"Let him alone," said Alexander. "Peasant ways are not our ways. He has courage and a loyal heart. If it suits him to live like a Mongol, perhaps he is wise."

Mikula hated Andrei, and one day was caught by that prince taking a new strap from his saddle-bag in exchange for one of Alexander's that was worn. Andrei seized the boy, threw him down and raised a whip, but before the leather thongs could descend, Mikula had snatched a dagger from his own boot and was on his feet, prepared to spring at Andrei, as Alexander appeared.

"I will administer the beating," said Alexander, and did so, strictly, but without violence, on the spot, to the accompaniment of piercing shrieks from Mikula.

For this punishment, the lad bore no malice against his master, but continued to detest Andrei. And Alexander, impressed by his loyalty, could not resist treating him afterwards with kindness and consideration.

Weeks of hard travelling across the steppes, brought them to the northern shores of the Sea of Aral and thence they followed the course of the great river Jaxartes, till, at the frontier town of Otrar, they came into a region once fertile, now desert, since the depredations, long since, of Chingiz Khan's armies. So ravaged and desolate was the district that it would surely never recover. The ground was still littered with the bones of men and animals. War, with its hideous wastage, had left on the land an imprint like the trail of some gigantic and frightful monster. And Alexander, remembering that his father had passed through this country and that the same imprint lay on the greater part of Russia, was cast into the depths of despair.

Along valleys, bleak, bare and swept by mountain winds, they rode then till they came to one of the post-houses, established by Ogotai at the end of the Great North Road. There they stopped a night for welcome rest, among various other travellers, Mongol warriors and merchants on the

way to or from the east. Next day they had to go on again, though the princes were still wearied in body and soul and Mikula's strength seemed to be failing.

The boy began to look like a ghost, with shadowed, frightened eyes and drooping figure. He no longer sang or jested with the Mongols, but pressed close to Alexander, who permitted him at last to ride alongside.

They went slowly up along the Road, first over naked foothills and then through that terrible and haunted mountain pass, the Dzungarian Gate. Here they struggled against the icy wind that blows continuously from the north, tossing the waters of Lake Ala Kul into waves, cutting the land into deep ravines on either side of the Road, and covering the contours of the Tian Shan range with snow. For forty-six miles, the length of the dreadful defile, they struggled thus, conscious at every step of the conquering armies that had marched westward, long since; so agonisingly conscious that they felt overborne by the weight of countless spectres, advancing against them.

It was surely no empty Road. The difficulty with which they drew breath could not be due only to fatigue and cold. They were forced apart, they were rendered impotent by the mass of an endless cavalcade pressing to destroy civilisation.

They had reached the eastern end of the pass and the darkness of an autumn evening was descending, for their progress since dawn had been

slow, when Mikula suddenly reeled in his saddle and fell to the ground like a sack, in a dead faint. Alexander was the first to dismount and lift the boy in his arms.

"Here is water," said one of the Mongols, throwing down a leather bottle. "He is young and tires easily. But we have only five miles to go to the next post-house."

"If water does not bring him round," said another, "cut a vein in his horse's flank and give him blood."

Andrei went on with the rest of the escort and the baggage-wagon and Alexander was left with the unconscious boy and the remaining horsemen. Mikula did not quickly revive and, by the time he opened his eyes, they had discovered that his shoulder had been dislocated by the heavy fall.

"At the post-house, we may find one of our Shamans," said the first Mongol. "They are good witch doctors and can doubtless mend the injury."

"The boy cannot ride so far," said Alexander, "and our horses are too weary to carry double weight. Get you on and overtake the wagon with the tents. Bring it back and we will put the shoulder in ourselves and camp here to-night."

As a natural commander of men he was obeyed at once. While one horseman departed swiftly on the errand, he explained to the other what must be done.

"I have seen a huntsman hurt in this way before, and remedied on the spot. I will sit on this rock

and hold Mikula upright on my knee, so. There is no need to take off his coat in this chill air and it will hurt him more. Now, stand beside us, rest your foot on the rock and put your knee in his armpit. When I say ready, this is how you must act. Press the elbow down with your hand and, at the same moment, raise the head of the bone with your knee. Then the joint will slip into place. Now, ready!"

The disciplined and practical Mongol did as he had been bidden. There was a sharp scream of anguish from Mikula, who fell forward sobbing in Alexander's arms. But the operation was accomplished and the Mongol stamped his feet and rubbed his hands gleefully.

"Ha! It is done! A fine piece of work. See, the shoulder is straight. Great is your wisdom, lord, and now I share it. I shall become a Shaman and do this magic on men who are hurt wrestling. . . . Since he is cured, let us mount straightway and go on."

"Then the shoulder might slip out again, for it is still weak. Nay, let us stay here, as it is arranged, and when we have got the boy under cover, I will bandage him and, after a night's rest, he will be fit to ride."

Before long, the wagon returned, the tents were unloaded and set up and some rice wine was discovered and poured down Mikula's throat. Then the horses were unsaddled, unbridled and turned loose, a fire of dried dung was lighted and a torch

was set up in the tent, to which Alexander carried the boy and laid him down on a pile of sheep skins.

Nevski himself was trembling with fatigue and emotion. He had often enough seen the suffering of men, but there was something in the difficult pain of this boy, amid these surroundings, that tried his nerve. The sudden failure of all Mikula's courage was horrible. Why did the lad continue to cry so piteously? Was this the way for a Russian to behave before Mongols?

"Leave me," he said to them irritably within the tent. "I can attend to my servant now, while you eat and sleep."

They grumbled, but again they were obliged to obey.

Alexander knelt down beside Mikula, who gazed up at him from wide terrified eyes, like holes burned in a white cloth, with tear-drops on the long lashes.

"Shame on you, Mikulushka, first to give way, and then to hurt yourself and then not to bear pain like a man. Did not I say you were too young to come? Now, lie still and I will take off your coat. Nay, fool, do not hinder me. I will not hurt you more."

The boy was feebly pressing him away, but, not too gently, he pulled open the coat of thick wadded cotton, revealed the under-shirt, laid bare the white breast. . . .

By the smoky light of the torch he could not see

clearly, yet he could feel what was beneath his hands. He started to his feet.

"God in Heaven, woman, who are you?" he said hoarsely.

XV

She whimpered like a small animal and covered her face with her hands. He knelt beside her again and dragged the hands apart.

"Accursed! Say, who are you?"

"From Novgorod."

"I know it. Your name?"

"Vassa."

"That tells me nothing."

"I am called Vassa—Vassilissa Ivanovna. But none could say if my father was Ivan."

There was a gleam of humour in her muttered words. He was far from observing it.

"With whom did you plot this devilment?"

"With Pyotr Yegorovich."

"With my friend? It is a lie. Speak the truth or I kill you."

"It is the truth. We meant no harm."

"You meant my ruin and will achieve it. I must learn more. Stop snivelling."

He held rice wine to her lips, forced her to drink, then sat back and said: "Now tell me."

A flush crept over her face. The fur-rimmed cap had fallen off her head and he noticed in the dim light that her hair, cut short in thick but ragged wisps, was fairer at the roots than at the ends. She shook this hair away from her eyes and answered: "You must believe me, my lord. I swear not to lie to you. Very long ago, you rode through the city of Novgorod and promised a ragged maid in the

street that the enemy should never come there. And the maid said, 'I will rejoice with you in the day of your triumph' and she put a kiss on your stirrup leather. But you will not remember."

"Go on."

"You were married at Toropetz and the maid came there to sing in the street at your wedding. And she found a man to care for her. Then this man was married and Vassa found another friend who took her back to Novgorod—a good little friend called Gosling."

"His real name?"

"He said, 'The brightest and the best have called me Gosling. Call me that too.' So I did. But he was a rich boyar, by name Churilo Plenkovich, and he had an umbrella which he loved. And I was his dear Vassa, whom he loved more than the umbrella."

"I knew Churilo. Well?"

"When Gosling died, I was rich, yet I wept. And in the day of your triumph, I rejoiced, sitting in a window in my golden gown. And again I rejoiced in your triumph and threw a bunch of violets so that they fell on the pommel of your saddle. Ah! I was happy. The young men who were with me—so many loved me—begged for one violet each. But they were all for you, because I had given you my heart long since."

"None of that, harlot. Pyotr told me your name that day. I remember now. How came Pyotr to be false to me? By winning you? Ay, I

see it now. He had to go and could not leave you. O shameful lust!"

"It was I who forced him."

"No need to tell that."

"My lord, listen. I had to go with you, to share your danger, perhaps your death. I told Pyotr that if he would take me as his servant, I would give him his desire. I said he need not fear, that none should ever know. I disguised myself well. I cut off my hair and blackened it with a dye. I was a very boy. I left everything and became Mikula. In the name of Christ, that is true, Alexander Yaroslavovich. I am of muzhik stock. Verily and indeed I am not Vassa now, but your servant, Mikulushka, who loves you."

"Plague-spot! How do you dare take the name of Christ or love on your lips! Abomination in the form of a woman—that is how I think of you. You who have been cast off even by Pyotr, you who have consorted with all and sundry—with the Tartars too doubtless—win me to your way by pretending a pure heart and devotion to Holy Russia."

He was on his feet now, shaking with rage and agitation.

"Kill me," she said, "but do not speak thus. I have never consorted with Tartars. None but Pyotr, who helped me and did not cast me off, know my sex, and he has sworn to keep the secret."

"I fell into your trap and brought you with me," he went on. "And now I have got you here on

my hands and God knows what I am to do with you. If I send you back from the next post-house with a westward-bound caravan——"

"I will surely kill myself."

"You might and your body would be stripped. Clothing is valuable in the wild. And *my* shame would be revealed. I should 'lose face' as the Tartars say. I should become a laughing-stock. Hear how the tale would travel. 'Ha! this Alexander, so grave and proud, what is he, after all, but one who cannot do without a woman, even on a journey, till he tires and has to get rid of her.' It would be the same if I slew you here and now. Who is to stop the discovery, who is to blame them? They have seen me beating you and favouring you! How else to their mind should a man treat his whim? If they find you dead, it will be thus and thus. . . . And if they do not find you, if I dig your grave and bury you deep, they will say, 'Where is our Mikula and what has befallen him?' "

"You could answer he had strayed and was lost."

"With an injured limb and none of the horses missing? When they are alert to every sound in the night time and every track on the ground? O wanton, how shall I hide you?"

"Let me live."

With her dark eyes fixed on him, she struggled to a seated posture and leaned forward.

"My lord, let me live, as Mikula, as your servant. I will not say a word. Have not I been careful hitherto? And if there is danger in your path,

let me go before you. And if there is poison in your cup, let me taste it first. For this I came and for no other reason. I am of no value, I do not matter. I have no existence except in fancy. No one will ever know me for what I am."

He showed her a distorted face. "I shall know," he said, and turned quickly away, lifted the door-flap and looked out into the night.

She drew her quilted coat over her breast, she reached for her cap and pulled it low on her head, she tottered to her feet and held her hands in the smoke of the torch till they were black, then wiped them over her face.

"Master," she said, "Mikula's place at night is under the cart."

He looked round at her.

"You see," she said, "I am your very Mikula, a poor muzhik, dirty and unkempt, wanting nothing but to serve you. Great princes do not know their serfs."

"I have seen," he said in a broken voice, "and how shall I forget?"

"You have seen a ragged maid in the streets of Novgorod and a lady in a golden gown at a window. These are still there and Novgorod can be remembered. But here in the wild are naught but the honesty and good fellowship of men. The great prince and the muzhik can work together even here for Holy Russia."

Suddenly one of the Mongols appeared out of the darkness.

"Here is a brew of kumiss," he said, offering a small jar of horn, "and some parched millet. How fares Mikula?"

Alexander took the food and there was a moment's silence, before he answered gravely: "I thank you. The lad will do. I have yet to make a sling for his arm. I will come with you and find a piece of cloth."

He went out with the Mongol and returned shortly, accompanied by the same man, who helped him to adjust a wide sling of felt over the sheepskin to support the injured shoulder. He spoke no word during the process and presently Vassa was left alone. She crouched on the ground and wept bitterly.

§

After that night, she recovered her serenity and none could have suspected the identity of Mikula. They rode on to the post-house, rejoined Andrei and the rest of the escort, and their journey proceeded.

Alexander kept his young servant at his side by day and permitted the boy to sleep at his feet by night, either in the tent which he shared with Andrei or in the common rest chamber of the post-houses, where all and sundry lay down together. There was little converse between master and lad, nor were they ever apart.

The secret they shared was too deep for words. The bond that united them was no fleshly tie.

For Alexander personal honour was the honour of his country. For Vassa love was rooted in devotion to her land. They could not do without each other and, since Holy Russia had first existed, their souls had been mated by a common aim. The prince had ever been the protector, the guardian. By his knightliness he had prevailed, and by his strength he had held fast against the pagan. The muzhik had ever been the holder, the tiller of the soil. And by his patience he had made it fruitful and by his submission he had held it. The interests of prince and muzhik were the same. With none to divide them by any policy of self, their sympathy was complete.

Consequently, the heroic spirit in Alexander strove with his body, the body of a young and ardent man, to know Vassa, not as a woman, despicable or desirable, but as a peasant in his charge; it strove and conquered. So also the simple soul in Vassa caused her to look on him, not as the delight of her eyes alone, but as her champion, her saviour and more: since she stood for mother earth, since she was nearer to that mother than he could ever be, he was her child. Hardily he fought for Russia, for himself and for her because she was necessary to safety. But more hardily did she fight at his side, with a great meekness and with no thought of self, for Russia and for him.

There were times when he hated her, and his hate burned him like a flame, yet his soul lived. And there were times when he remembered a lady

in a golden gown, sitting in a window, nibbling sunflower seeds and smiling, and his dreams were anguish, and still his soul lived.

"This is no mortal woman," said his soul to him. "This is Mikula, the muzhik, the deathless spirit of the land, your inviolable charge. Mikula is real; and Vassa, the harlot, is not here and has never been. Mikula is with you, now and always, but the lady in the window was a passing vision, empty of meaning."

And again his soul spoke to him, saying:

"How should Alexander know the harlot, Vassilissa? What is such a one to him? She has only a body. But the muzhik Mikula is true and faithful. He has many faults, yet he is innocent as a child. There can be comradeship between Alexander and Mikula. The prince and the peasant can understand each other."

And Vassa, out of her love, knew well what his soul said without the need of words. For, though he was unaware of it, she was that soul.

So they travelled on by the Great North Road, through the country of the Naimans (a Mongol tribe) and the territories called Bishbalig and Urumtsi. Here they heard how certain holy Friars of the Catholic Church, who had preceded them, had reported seeing many monsters, Cyclops, Amazons and the like. But there were no monsters among the Naimans, though when they reached the oasis city of Hamil, they found many comely women among its Uigur people and a monstrous freedom

of manners, with regard to these women's entertainment of travellers.

This was the end of the Great North Road. They did not, however, stay long at Hamil. It was necessary that they should hasten on north-eastward to Karakorum, the capital of Kuyuk, the Great Khan.

First, for many days, they had to traverse the edge of the Great Gobi Desert, carrying all supplies with them, and feeling stimulated by the keen air, which only the wind or the absence of sunshine rendered bitterly cold. Here many wild asses were to be seen, and later, when patches of forest land began, there was other game to enliven the scene.

Then, as the arid ground changed to grassy steppes, near the courses of great rivers, the Mongol escort rejoiced and said that this was their home-land. There was no such splendid land in all the world. The Russian princes were welcome therein, and they should see how much greater and finer it was than any western land.

"Ho! Mikulushka, you have been too silent, ever since you hurt your shoulder. Now you shall recover and sing to us again. Here we do not till and plough, like you, but we worship High Heaven and the good earth and, as the stars run over the sky, so do we gallop over the land."

"Is it true, what I have heard, that your people have been taught the Christian faith?" said Alexander.

"Assuredly it is true. Kuyuk Khan himself professes it and has a splendid tent chapel, brought him from the west, where the same rites as those of Russia are practised. I am not a Christian but a Shamanist. Yet the chief difference between us is this. Our land is too vast and too poor for the plough. Wherefore, we have always wandered and depended on our herds, and the felt images that we set up in our tents are in honour of the fertility of those herds, ordained by Heaven and earth. Your earth, or at least the southern part of it, is rich. Wherefore you have always settled and depended on your crops, and the ikons that you set up in your buildings are in honour of Christ, Who taught that men should live in good fellowship, and of the saints who have protected your crops."

"It is a strange idea, but maybe true," said Alexander.

"We are well acquainted with other creeds and we tolerate them all," said the Mongol. "For a wise man of Cathay said to me once: 'Every country produces its own faith and it is folly that they should thrust their own upon each other.' Myself, I believe that if we adopt another faith, that of the Buddhists from our borderlands perchance, it will be our end as a people."

At last they reached Karakorum, which was also called Ordu Balik, the royal city. It was not so great a place as Sarai would be, for its circumference was only three miles and it had only two main streets. But as the capital of Mongolia, it was

more important. One of its streets was occupied chiefly by the Mohammedans, who had been under the special protection of the Empress Regent Turakina, now dead. The other street was the abode of Chinese craftsmen, who flocked here from their ruined country, now under Mongol dominion. The palaces of the Khan and of his court lay scattered and apart, surrounded by no less than twelve Buddhist temples, two mosques of Islam, and one permanent Christian church.

They entered the city through one of its four gates, set in a mud wall, and were conducted to a house, built on the Turkish plan, which had been set apart for their use. Later, Alexander and Andrei were decorously received by Kuyuk Khan, that strange and silent man, who was never known to smile and had actually usurped the throne under his mother's influence. Around him were gathered his princely cousins: Mangu, who would succeed him and had but lately returned from western conquests; Hulagu, who would build a mighty Persian empire; and Kublai, the greatest of them all, who looked to the Far East.

But Alexander did not notice them, nor was he impressed. All he knew was that his obligation to these people must be fulfilled for the protection of Russia. All he wanted was, first that he might discover the facts and avenge, if possible, his father's death; and then that he might depart again into his own country.

XVI

As at Sarai, so at Karakorum, Alexander was recognised by the reigning Khan and by all with whom he came in contact, for a man of exceptional character. His dignity, his courage and his courtesy were extolled by everyone. The Mongols admired him and sought his friendship. Chinese sages complimented him on a wisdom equal to their own. Turks and Persians, trembling for their prestige, invited his advice. And European craftsmen at the court felt that his presence there improved their status.

He despised none, but he remained independent and aloof. He called no man his friend, but treated all with grave ceremony and reserve, never forgot his own position as a vassal and by his submission made himself more and more respected.

His eldest brother, Constantine, who had remained here, had practically become a Mongol and was ignored. Andrei, who accompanied him, fell once more into the net of flattery and hesitated neither openly to accept favours from Kuyuk nor privately to abuse the pagans. Vassilissa, in her guise as the boy Mikula, stayed an inconspicuous unit of Alexander's household, associating with none, shadowing the prince, whenever he tersely commanded her presence, but more often sitting alone, engaged on some duty with regard to his clothing or equipment.

By day she occupied his rooms or the courtyard.

By night, at his expressed wish for their mutual safety, she slept at his feet. Whenever any but he addressed her, she pretended defective understanding and wore a sullen and foolish expression, so that those who had first known her at Sarai and on the journey, reported a garbled account of the accident she had sustained, saying: "It was not only Mikula's shoulder that was hurt; it was his head, and he has never recovered from the fall. None would guess the bright lad he was once."

There were feasts for the princes, when she stood behind Alexander's seat and, unnoticed, observed all that was given him to drink or eat, ready to taste first, if her suspicions were aroused. There were hunting expeditions, when she rode beside him, disregarded, alert to throw herself between him and any possible danger.

Alexander confessed frankly the reason of the lad's presence.

"His family have long been my faithful servants. I promised them never to lose sight of Mikula when I brought him with me. We Russians keep faith, even with our serfs."

One day, while Alexander was out, she found a balalaika and, sitting in his room, touched its strings and, for the first time since the journey, sang softly the words of the old ballad:

"He saw her the youth and must escape her,
From Sorrow he fled to the fiery fever,
To fever and illness and laid him to bed,
And Sorrow followed him.

She tracked him out and sat at his feet,
'Stand and deliver, avaunt not champion!'
He saw her, the youth, and must escape her.
From Sorrow he fled to the coffin box,
To the coffin box, to his little grave mound,
To his little grave in the grey dun earth,
And Sorrow followed him.
She tracked him out, in her hand her shovel,
In her hand her shovel and drove in her carriage.
'Stand and deliver, avaunt not champion!'
Scarce was the breath alive in the champion,
But Sorrow raked in his little grave mound
Into his grave, into grey mother earth.
And they sing the fame of the goodly youth."

She lifted her eyes and saw Alexander standing in the doorway.

"If you must sing, Mikula, let it be of yourself," he said with a terrible look. And she laid the balalaika aside and crept away and hid herself.

Time went forward, and beyond long-delayed diplomatic negotiations, by which Alexander hoped to win from Kuyuk some merciful dispensation for Novgorod, he learned some of the circumstances of his father's death. His informant was an old Shaman called Shiré, who remembered Yaroslav well and had little regret for the passing of the late Empress-Regent.

"Turakina was a proud and wilful woman," he said, "and she brought no good to our country. It is true that Prince Yaroslav offended her at a feast and that she invited him to a private audience and next day he was discovered dead of poison in his own tent. What happened at that audience,

who knows? God alone knows. Not even Turakina would have murdered a guest, who had eaten our salt, for a small reason. But there was one beside her, who, hoping for further favour, would have committed that crime."

"Tell me, that if this person still lives, justice may be done."

"Fatima, the witch-woman, Turakina's favourite, has indeed lived too long," said Shiré. "It is certain that she has practised witchcraft, which by our law is punishable with death. So far the Khan has protected her. But Kuyuk has a high opinion of your discretion. If you, rightly seeking to avenge your father, accuse Fatima, he will listen to you."

"Can there be no doubt that she administered the poison?"

"In no Mongol mind is there any doubt. Moreover the suspicion is reasonable. No one else was with Turakina at the time. No one else could profit by the death of Prince Yaroslav."

"It would be better for you to bring the accusation against the woman."

"Then I shall use your name to give it weight. Do you approve?"

"Assuredly I approve the penalty of crime."

"It is time that the unauthorised practice of witchcraft should be put down," said Shiré, who was himself famed as a witch-doctor. "You would not believe how the practice is spreading among our women. Even some of the Imperial ladies

cannot escape suspicion. It is whispered of Ogotai's widow (the mother of the dispossessed heir Shiramum), and also of Kuyuk's wife, Ogul Gaimish. Wherefore it is become the fashion. They consort with the powers of darkness. They ape the ways of men and are able to appear at will in men's form."

Alexander shuddered slightly. "There can be nothing in that," he said, passing it off. "I have often, at a little distance, mistaken Mongol ladies, riding astride and wearing the high-plumed headdress that you call the Botta, for a troop of warriors, carrying their lances at rest."

"We do not judge by outward seeming, but by what the apparel may hide," said Shiré. "We value the chastity of our women. Who but a witch would attempt to hide her sex?"

The woman, Fatima, a hideous Turkish hag, was accordingly accused, and in due time convicted and sentenced to death by Kuyuk. Her execution was to be attended by her accuser and the whole court, and was to take place beyond the city walls.

Vassilissa did not join the large concourse of people, and remained at Alexander's house. Today, as often before, she took advantage of privacy to change and wash her clothing, to crop her hair short and to darken it again with a dye that she had obtained in the market. She had just finished her strange toilet, when Alexander suddenly entered the room, barred the door behind him and stood

leaning against it and staring at her. Sweat ran down his pale face and knotted veins stood out on his temples.

"O God," he whispered, "they are not human! They sewed up her lips. But still she screamed in her throat. They wrapped her body in felt and threw it down and pounded it with great sticks. And still she moved!"

"Who, master?"

"A woman, as you are. A vile woman, accused of witchcraft. An old woman who deserved pity, and had none beforehand, even from me. Are you less vile than she was? Have you never brought men to death? May not you be a witch? And if they discover you . . ."

"Master, will you betray me?"

He hid his face on his arm against the door and groaned.

"Nay, how should you betray me?" she said gently. "You are well aware I am no woman, but Mikula, your servant."

At that he looked round. Horror and anguish showed in his eyes. "Do you, who plotted to rob me of mine honour, now mean to rob me of my manhood? Not of its fevers. I can conquer those. But of all that makes it decent, its truth and its strength. My soul has spoken to me in the watches of the night time and it used your voice, it uttered your words. O false soul! Have not I a body? Am not I a man? And how can my body help but know you for a woman? It can hate you, it

can lust after you. But Christ help it, do not you see that it can desire to shield you, only because you are different from itself?"

She bowed her head.

"Woman, this torment must cease. If you remain here, I cannot shield you."

"What new danger is there, my lord?"

"She asks it to my face—ah! senseless—when she shares my knowledge, knowledge that may be suspected at any moment from a glance, a word, a change of countenance! . . . Listen, then! They have killed. Their passions are roused. They will go witch hunting, seeking any woman in the guise of a man. Some knew Mikula and could vouch for him. But Mikula is changed; he no longer laughs or sings or learns to ride. They are shrewd. If they say, 'Perchance this is no Mikula,' we are undone. You must go, you must go with the next westward-bound caravan."

There was silence for a moment. Then she said: "Master, I would obey you; but, think well, is it wise? I would not kill myself; I would guard my life for your honour. Yet on a long perilous journey there is risk of accident. I was hurt before. Take rather the smaller risk of my discovery here."

"Do not you fear to remain?"

"I fear far more to leave you!"

"I am shaken, I am afraid. I never thought to confess it. Yet you trust me to guard you?"

"With thankfulness—for ever."

"It is folly; you do not understand. We must have some plan to act upon in case of need."

She considered for a while. "Here is a plan. If there is any suspicion, leave it to me. I shall say secretly to a few: 'Verily you have guessed right. I am not Mikula, but a young relative of Alexander Yaroslavovich, who insisted that I should thus be disguised, for fear that Kuyuk Khan should keep me as an hostage. It is shameful that I should not be acknowledged here. But Alexander has forbidden me to speak, because his honour is pledged to take me back with him. Tell it not, or he will surely beat me.' If I say this, in case of need, the Mongols will laugh. Even Kuyuk, hearing it by chance, would smile at the thought of so poor a hostage, who might besides be a liar. Thus, given another hare to hunt, one they will never trouble to pursue to the end, they will let the first hare—a witch in man's clothing—go by."

"If Andrei or Constantine should hear it, they will know you are not a relative and they have no discretion."

"How should you be aware of my lies? You will deny them hotly, and the Mongols will laugh the more."

Alexander seated himself and sighed heavily.

"I am weary to death. But you have wit as well as courage."

"Forgive me, sir; I have no virtue."

"True enough, and strange. Can good come out of evil? You seem innocent and are not so. You

appear honest and it is guile. Tell me, do not you regret leaving Novgorod?"

"Did the woman who was taken in adultery grieve when she found her Saviour? Ay, she grieved with a whole heart for her sins, my lord, and never could she return to them. Yet those very sins brought her to His feet. Perchance they were destined. Perchance she had even sought Him from the beginning in that crooked way. And when she found Him, she was at peace, for she had not yielded her soul before, but only her flesh which was of small account. Master, be merciful to me, a sinner. Do not condemn me, though I should be despised and rejected. You are no man to me, but a god, a blessed saint from Heaven. I am nothing. I have no existence except in my love for you."

She was kneeling before him now, with her hands crossed on her breast and her head bent.

"Go, go," he said quickly. "You speak blasphemy. We are human, you and I. Would you have me forget wife and children? Would you have me regard you as one who gained sainthood through repentance? Oh, leave me, go, for I know not what to think of you! I know not whether you are accursed or whether it is I!"

Then she went away and brought him food and wine for his refreshment and caused him to forget her presence in her service as Mikula.

§

As it happened, no suspicion of her identity was forthcoming. His fears had arisen from the state of extreme nervous tension in which he was living and were actually groundless. Nevertheless, he could not escape the torment they gave him by day and the disturbance of rest they brought by night. He would start up from frightful dreams that invaded his sleep, calling Mikula's name aloud and, when she went to his side, he would beg, in an agonised whisper, some assurance that no other name had passed his lips.

Whereupon Andrei, at the other side, would call him a fool to hold the name of his wife, Alexandra, so sacred. And Vassa would murmur gently: "Mikula is here, my dear lord. You mentioned none other but the Princess Alexandra."

In the daytime he would avoid her, and go about his business with a set stern face that none would have recognised as the radiant young face of Nevski. It was lined with care, and white threads appeared in his short brown beard. And, though these effects were mainly due to hidden trouble, all ascribed them to the grief he suffered for his country.

This grief was indeed great enough. He realised now that there was no escape from the Mongol yoke; even proud Novgorod, to survive at all, would have to submit. All he could do for Novgorod or any other place was to plead for justice and impartiality. If Novgorod yielded, through him, surely Novgorod at least need not, like other cities, be ruined. That was only right and reason-

able. He did not ask for mercy. He knew well that the Mongols had no use for that word.

At last, Kuyuk solemnly gave the long-sought assurance. Cousin Batu should be informed that no more Russian states should be ravaged. Such would be the command of the Great Khan, potent enough even to control the Golden Horde.

At least so Kuyuk hoped. After all, Batu was independent; the Golden Horde was very strong. Well, well, Alexander Nevski must manage his own affairs as well as he could, placate Batu and keep the Russian people from any revolt that might invite reprisals. Kuyuk felt certain that Alexander would be capable of this. Alexander had shown evidence of great qualities. It had been a pleasure to entertain Alexander here. And now for a parting draught of kumiss.

Kuyuk was tired of the Russian question, tired also of Karakorum and its various dissensions. When Alexander departed westward, Kuyuk intended to travel in that direction himself, as far as Hamil, to distribute largesse among his vassals. The Empress Ogul Gaimish would remain at Karakorum as regent. It was true he did not love Batu. How should he, the son of Ogotai, love any son of the bastard, Juchi? But he would never attack Batu; he would go no further than Hamil. Uncle Tului's family, his wife and his sons, Mangu and Kubilai, were hand in glove with Batu. Probably Mangu meant to use Batu's influence, and to succeed as Great Khan. Kuyuk did

not really care. He was tired of everything, even of his own children, even of Ogul Gaimish. . . . Had Alexander Nevski tired of his wife too? No? That was strange. The only thing of which one did not tire was kumiss and there might be fresh pleasures at Hamil. He would certainly go no further than Hamil. . . .

Accordingly he went and died there, while Alexander was still on his way back to Sarai.

XVII

DURING the long journey back to Sarai, Alexander was so watchful of Vassilissa that the Mongol escort became jealous and impatient and even the careless Andrei began to wonder at his brother's concentration on the boy.

It was she, then, who showed strength to avert suspicion, and she who acted as protector to them both. Nervous strain was at last preventing him from acting a part, but she played the favoured servant, spoilt by too much consideration, to the end. She regained her spirits as they travelled, treated Andrei with more deference than Alexander and sang and laughed with the Mongols, till she had won them from ill-humour and they said genially: "Ha! Here is our Mikula once more! Mikula surely never reached the homeland. But now we have picked him up on the way westward."

Nevski's anxiety was only too apparent. Hers, which was entirely for him, was never betrayed. Hers was the immortal soul of Russia, the patient, simple soul of the muzhik, which will sacrifice all for the beloved object. For her ancestors, their all had been their land. For her, there was nothing but a prince, who seemed to her a saint, and who was, moreover, identified in her mind with the holiness of her country.

To serve him, she could be shrewd as well as simple, cunning as well as devoted. She amused the Mongols with folk-lore stories of Russia. She

told them: "'There is a halcyon sea and from its untroubled waters silver mists arise. And a gnarled oak grows on the shore, and a learned cat, that is chained with a chain of gold, walks forward and back. And he sings as he goes to the right and as he goes to the left he tells strange tales of enchantment. . . .'"[1] She told them of Mishka the Bear, with whom she had played in the forests as a child. And of the little barking dog who acted as a courier between Vladimir the prince and his captive daughter.

They listened to her spell-bound, grunting approval of their Mikula. And she would end every story with the aphorism: "Whether the journey is little or long, the tale is soon told, but the deed slowly done." While in her heart, she rejoiced and thought: "I am the learned cat, I am Mishka the bear, I am the little barking dog! I am all these faithful ones so long as I can serve my lord."

At last they came back to Sarai and found it, after the lapse of two years, a flourishing city. But during that time Batu Khan had aged noticeably. His conquests had been extended over southern Russia to the Crimea, and everywhere his generals were enforcing his rule. The government of the Golden Horde was, however, slipping from his hands, nominally into the hands of his elder son, Sartach, but actually into those of his younger brother, Barka.

This Barka, an ambitious, crafty man, was biding

[1] From Pushkin's Prologue to *Ruslan and Lyudmila*.

his time and meanwhile supported, with the senile connivance of Batu, the Khan's other son, Ulvachi. Between these four, disorder threatened to become rampant. Batu could only grin and nod and seemed almost to have forgotten Alexander Nevski. Sartach had no interest beyond the enmity of his uncle Barka. And the youth, Ulvachi, took every advantage of the moment, without much thought of the future, greedily demanded presents of all vassals and travellers who came to Sarai and acted generally with an offensive show of pride.

To whom could Alexander appeal for justice? One of the first things he learned was that his uncle Sviatoslav had been dispossessed of Vladimir by his youngest brother, Plucky Michael: exactly what he had expected to happen. Now Michael had gone off, bravely enough, to resist the inroads of the Lithuanians on Russia's western frontier and Vladimir remained without any prince to protect, not only its own interests, but those of Novgorod. There was no news of Novgorod. Apparently, neither Alexander's mother, Feodosia, nor his wife, Alexandra, had sent any letter during the last two weary years. Not even his friend, Bishop Cyril, had written. He did not know whether his family was alive or dead.

His druzhina had left Sarai and no one could give any information of their whereabouts. There was a rumour that Pyotr Yegorovich had married a Mongol wife and had gone to the Crimea.

Alexander realised that his trials, far from being

over with his return, were only now beginning. They must be faced. Though his nerve was strained to breaking-point, though he was tired to death, duty still demanded all his forethought, all his wisdom. He was concentrated on the safety of Vassilissa. Therefore, he must be free of her, before anything else.

With an urgent request that his faithful servant, the boy Mikula, might be given a safe-conduct to Novgorod, he approached first Batu, who promised and did nothing, then Sartach, who would not even promise, and finally Ulvachi, who in a lordly manner agreed, but confessed that it would be better to ask Barka.

After some delay, Vassilissa's northward journey was arranged and a day fixed for her departure. Alexander told her shortly that she must go and that he relied on her continued discretion. They were alone, and she drew a deep breath but could not speak.

He did not look at her as he said: "Hitherto you have saved us both. For that, I owe you gratitude. The past is past. We cannot tell the future, but you and I will not meet again."

"It shall be as you wish, my lord," she whispered.

"You will go to Novgorod, since that is whence you came. Have you any friends there, other than men?"

She shook her head with a slight smile.

"The manner of life you will lead cannot concern me. But as you left it once——" He paused;

then, thrusting a bag into her hands: "Here is gold in case of need. You must not be in want on my account. Nay, I insist that you take it."

"I will take it," she said, and sobbed.

"Well, well, there is something to remember out of all this horror. We end as comrades, Mikula." He spoke with forced lightness.

She fell on her knees and took his hand. "Master, call me once by my name. Say to me, 'Vassa, go and sin no more.' "

He laid his other hand on her head and gently stroked it. "Go and sin no more, Vassa. . . . Dear child, God be with you!"

Her tears fell on his fingers and he drew them away from her clasp. Then he turned from her and hid his face. And she went, as though following a vision.

§

When she was gone, his thoughts flew to Novgorod. He remembered Vassilissa in the Court of Yaroslav, accompanied by young men, throwing him a bunch of violets. He remembered her wearing a golden gown and sitting in a window, smiling and nibbling sunflower seeds. But still more vividly he remembered her as a ragamuffin of the streets looking up into his face and saying: "You will never allow the enemy to come to Great Lord Novgorod?" And he had answered: "God helping me, I will never allow it."

Now the fulfilment of that promise depended

mainly on the safety of Vladimir. Novgorod might yet escape if Vladimir, to which it was considered subject, was wisely controlled. But some Russian prince must exert this control and act as an intermediary between the Mongol power and the people: survivors who were only too ready to rebel in defence of their land. On account of that unconquerable native soul, the all-important question of the Vladimir succession must be decided at once.

This time, it seemed best first to approach Barka. But Barka was deep in foreign affairs, contemplating a strong alliance with the Kipchak Mameluke Sultan of Egypt, Beibar, against the cousin of Kuyuk Khan, that strong prince, Hulagu, who even now was preparing to invade Persia and might well extend his dominion further. How should Barka listen to Alexander Nevski, when all he wanted was to seize the Kipchak throne of the Golden Horde, with the support of Beibar, who was already sending him rich and rare presents in the shape of sacred relics of Islam, arms of war, horses and camels, a live giraffe, black eunuchs and female cooks?

Ulvachi, furiously jealous of these gifts and particularly of the giraffe, did not care what happened to Vladimir. Sartach was only anxious to rid the world of Barka, before Barka struck the first blow against himself. Batu Kahn remained and he was incapable of judgment, his mind shadowed with who knows what frightful memories of slaughter.

He received Alexander coldly and spoke with a kind of feeble malice. Nevski had, he understood, done well in Mongolia. Now, perhaps, all Russian princes would realise the tolerance of their conquerors. All that was asked was a reasonable submission, without interference. The chief enemies of the Russians were themselves. Sviatoslav had been unable to hold Vladimir against his own nephew and now that nephew had deserted the place. As to who should succeed Michael, did it really matter? Then it might be settled at once. Let Nevski's brother, Andrei, go there.

Alexander knew well that this would be worse than useless. Andrei, who long since had proved his incapability at Novgorod; Andrei, who took favours from the Mongols and boasted privately that he would yet rouse the country to resist them; Andrei was the last person to hold the difficult position of Grand Duke of Vladimir. But of this, very little could be said to Batu. The Khan must never be allowed to suspect a non-existent feud between the brothers.

Enough was said, however, bluntly and honestly to arouse Batu's obstinacy.

"Look you, Nevski; you may be Andrei's elder and by rights the heir to Vladimir. But you have no longer any rights. And if I send you north, where you would be, I stand to be accused of favouritism. By now, Andrei has had as great experience as yourself. Therefore he shall hold Vladimir for us and you shall be counted prince of Kiev."

For Alexander, the empty title to a ruined state, so crushed and lifeless that there would be no need of his diplomacy! For Andrei, the title to a state equally ruined, but superior and still vital as Russia's former capital, where folly would soon fan smouldering embers into a blaze of revolt. The position would be hopeless, more particularly as the north, seeing its hero in the south, would vainly believe that he was only there to restore and rouse Kiev to its assistance. Kiev the capital before Vladimir, Kiev the once holy city, could surely not be extinct if Alexander, his country's saviour, was there.

Yet Batu had to be obeyed. Andrei, bowing low in acknowledgment of the Khan's favour, with his tongue in his cheek and a whisper to Alexander of how he meant to use his opportunity, was despatched northward. Alexander, in desperate distress, had orders to go to the bank of the Dnieper, where the city of Kiev had now been rebuilt, a shadow of its former splendour.

Mongol troops and artisans of various nations would go with him. He was to collect fugitives from the forests, restore confidence and instal them in the new place, to prove that the Golden Horde knew how to construct and to rule as well as how to destroy.

The work was useful, but while he stayed there pining for work more suited to his ability, he realised that Holy Kiev could never live again and that the whole of ancient Russia had thus perished.

From Galicia, on his way to Sarai, there passed through Kiev old Prince Daniel, stricken with despair and urgent in his warning to Alexander that any promises of aid from the Pope of Rome should not be trusted. Like a sad spectre he came, babbling of his sorrow, and like the spirit of Russian vacillation he went, murmuring against the Latin Church and still casting wistful backward glances towards the indifferent west.

Here was the typical hesitant mentality of the Slav, incapable of decisive action. If any resurrection of the Russian nation were possible, it must be due to some spark more vital than princely ambition. Only in the soul of the people could that spark be found. And this lovely part of the country, the natural wealth of which no visitation, as of a swarm of locusts, could quite destroy, was surely the birthplace of that Russian soul. In the rich black earth, crops of clover, lucerne and hemp had already been sown again, trampled orchards had been replanted with cherry, apple and pear trees, and huts with clean thatched roofs and walls of plaited wicker, covered with light coloured clay, were springing up in small scattered villages. Again, after ten years of Mongol occupation, the unconquerable muzhiks, who knew no enemy more formidable than Nature, were erecting their beehives and breeding their sheep and oxen. And Nature, as though to reward this spirit with a smile of favour, caused the nightingales once more to sing in the woodland and in spring-time scattered

her largesse of crocuses and hyacinths on the banks of rivers and lakes. Calm and vast flowed Mother Nepra, that great stream, between overhanging hills, dark forests and meadows starred with wild flowers. And Alexander, riding afield, with a heavy and wondering heart, met on a day an old peasant woman, who, with the resolution and the love of conversation inherent to her race, lightened for a little time his cares.

The old woman's face was lined with many sorrows, but her grey eyes were shrewd and whimsical. She was bowed beneath a faggot of wood, which she carried on her shoulder and, when Alexander offered to take it on his saddle to her destination, she acceded gratefully and trudged beside him as he rode, talking all the way.

"Christ's blessing be upon your honour! It is the help we give one another that brings salvation. Love comforts all sadness and dries all tears. . . .

"We are a lazy lot, soft and given over-much to dreams. Wherefore the wrath of God came upon us. And yet God, in His mercy, still lets us keep our dreams. Where should we be without them? Perchance the dreams are real and the punishment was but a shadow, sent to try us.

"You may believe me, your honour, I would not tell you a lie: the thoughts of our minds are things, and that was made clear to me when my little daughter—my heart's darling—died. That would be a matter of many years ago. I forget how long.

The Tartars came, the accursed—ay! they who remain, and they burned the homestead and slew my good man where he stood with his pitchfork, and struck down the child, where she played by the pond. And only I escaped, for that I had gone into the forest to gather a swarm of bees.

"When I returned, there was the smoking ruin and there were my dead. But the terrible horsemen had gone, like a passing storm. Then I sat down and wept full sore. And I did not weep so much for my good man and the house as for the child.

"Saving your presence, sir, perhaps you would not understand that? A man's first thought would be that a woman would grieve most for her protector and her roof-tree, but he would be wrong. The woman cares for the man and keeps the house only for the sake of the child. And God was good to me in my child. She was a lovely, golden thing, like sunlight, pretty and tender in all her ways. I buried her body myself. . . .

"Nay, I do not weep for her now, sir. And this is why. I wept very long and bitterly. I wept myself sick and longed to die, till a neighbour, who had escaped likewise, found me and tended me and begged me to live in the hope of comfort.

"I said, 'Gossip,' I said (she was a woman like myself that had lost all), 'Gossip, there is no hope left for me in this world. Let me go and look for my dove in Heaven.'

"She answered me and said: 'To-morrow will

be the Feast of All Souls, when they that have passed do appear in the churchyard. The church is burned, like our homesteads,' she said, 'but assuredly that will make no difference to our dears. Let us go there and look for them,' said she.

"Well, your honour, I went on weeping. I wept till I was wet as though I had fallen into water. But on the next night I went with my neighbour to the churchyard, and, God save us, it was a dreadful place. The wooden palings were broken and flat and the holy house was a black ruin, like a devil's tomb. And the graves were trampled and muddy and it seemed that the last day had come and gone and that the dead were damned. Then I sank on the ground and wept again, so that I could not even pray. But my neighbour, who was a brave woman, kneeled beside me and called aloud on the saints by name.

"It was a clear night, you understand, and the moon rode high and white, like a ship driven by a gentle wind. And the wind itself seemed to make the night like day—a pale, empty day, as it was in the beginning of the world.

"Suddenly my neighbour said, 'Look!'

"And when I looked, as well as I could for tears, there came my good man through the gap in the palings, where the gate had been, wearing his best, his red trousers and his blue coat that he had not on when he died, and carrying his cap and his pitchfork. If he hadn't been bare-headed, I might not have known him. But there, it was he without

a shadow of doubt; his crown shaved except for one long brown lock and his drooping moustaches nicely smoothed for the feast.

"After him came all the neighbours who had died. There was old Uncle Igor, who was really a disgrace: he drank too much, but when he was merrily drunk, he used to dance very well. There was the young farmer Petrov, a likely lad, with his new wife on his arm. There was the cripple boy Michael and his strong sister Olga, wearing her beautiful green jacket with the chequered pattern, for which some said she had sold her soul. Well, well, it may not have been true!

"There were many more and, on my life, it's true what I am telling you, all of them were in their best. The reason wasn't far to seek. As they came, the church bell sounded, and I looked round, for how could there be a bell when there was no church?

"But there was a church, after all, white and shining, as though built of mist and rainbow, and aglow from the lights within. They went up to the church door, one behind the other, and in the porch they crossed themselves before they entered.

"But my Masha, my darling, was not there. I called her name. I could not bear her to be left behind. I thought, perhaps I had not buried her body aright and that her soul could not hear the bell. She was such a little one—the others should have waited for her.

"Then I saw her, in the gap, toiling up the slope

and she was pulling after her a big wooden barrel. It was a shame to see, she so small and weak with that great load, and my tears gushed out again to think she should be thus hindered. She lifted her head and stopped and gazed straight at me very sorrowfully.

"I said, 'Masha, beloved, you'll surely be late for the feast! What ails you, child? Leave that barrel and get along!'

"She did not speak or stir, but she looked from me to the barrel and back again and shook her head.

"Then I saw that the drops from my eyes and from my wet dress were running in a little stream down to the barrel and entering into its open end. My tears were the load she was pulling. My grief was her hindrance.

"Now wasn't that pitiful, so to cumber the child's soul? Well, well, directly I knew the truth, I stopped weeping and rubbed my face on the dry earth and cried aloud: 'Blessed are those who die in the Lord!'

"And when I looked up again, she had left the barrel behind and was running joyfully into the church. . . .

"And presently the vision faded. There was nothing but my neighbour and I in the desolate churchyard, with the moon riding high in the midnight sky. But for me, the church was no ruin, and for me, grief was the only fear.

"I never wept again, your honour, never again.

For I knew that my lamb was safe in God's keeping and I knew that love is a happy thing. . . .

"Thank you kindly, sir. Ay, this is my hut. Christ be with you and drive sadness from your face. What does this world matter? We have our dreams and they are real. And we have our faith and that is still more real."

XVIII

ALEXANDER had not long been at Kiev, when terrible news reached him there, through the Mongols. The people of Vladimir, encouraged by Andrei, were in open revolt against the authority of their conquerors. Mongol officials had been killed and the whole of the north was wild with excitement.

Plucky Michael had met his death in battle against the Lithuanians on the western frontier, and his body had been brought back to Vladimir. Some said that this fact had aroused the patriotism of the people, but there was no doubt that Andrei, who held his position as prince of Vladimir by Mongol favour, was chiefly to blame. A punitive expedition had already been despatched from Sarai. First the horsemen would meet Andrei's opposing force and then, as avengers, they would go on to carry fire and sword once more to Vladimir.

Alexander knew that there was no time to be lost. At all costs, he must go straightway back to Sarai and intercede for his country. He must sacrifice his pride, he must put himself in the false position of blaming Andrei and begging the rule of Vladimir for himself, so that he might guarantee due submission for the future and thereby save not only Vladimir but Novgorod.

He travelled in great haste, exhausting the strength he had never recovered since his return from Mongolia. He had no presents for Ulvachi,

who consequently refused to see him. He could not gain the ear of Barka, and Sartach's officers grinned in his face when he confessed that his mission was peace. With sinking heart, he approached old Batu, disregarded now by all.

Like a lone wolf, once the mighty leader of the pack, Batu sat alone, waiting for death, which once he had dealt so widely. Who knows whether he, the conqueror, feared now that invincible presence? Who knows what haunting visions of the end touched even his ambitious soul? His bleared eyes lightened with a flash of recognition as he beheld Alexander.

"Ha! It is my friend, Nevski. I always said there was not a man to equal Nevski in all the world."

"I come not as a friend, O Khan, but as a suppliant. The power is yours. Men seek to rob you of it. Even my brother Andrei has flouted your authority."

"Andrei will be punished. Is Nevski so just that he approves? Ay, for, with all his virtues, Nevski is a Rus and cannot love his brother."

"Hear me, O Khan. There is no jealousy between Andrei and myself. But Andrei is at fault and he must pay the penalty. He is young and foolish. He should never have been entrusted with the control of Vladimir. Is not Batu still great enough to remedy a mistake? Who rules the Golden Horde now: is it Batu, or his brother, or his sons? If it be his sons, is it Sartach or

Ulvachi? Ulvachi grows fat with many gifts. Sartach will rob the Mongols of a Russian empire by senseless revenge against the people who are not responsible for revolt, but who will still die to the last man in defence of their land. Of what use to you is the creation of another desert? Shall Russia be a waste, peopled only with aliens, or shall it be a new and great power, founded on the collaboration of her princes and the industry of her peasants?"

"How you talk," murmured Batu. "We Mongols act. I can still show you. They have not drawn my teeth yet. Ulvachi grows fat, you say? A man should not grow fat. You are lean enough. And Sartach is a fool. I always knew it. If I could not have Nevski for my friend, I would have chosen him for my son. A lean hard man, a good soldier. Is that Nevski? Come, sit beside me. You shall hold Vladimir."

"Can you enforce that order?" said Alexander, still standing.

"Cannot I? My secretary shall draw it up and I will set my seal thereto and so shall Sartach and so shall Barka. You have restored my strength. A new, great power, founded on the collaboration of princes and the industry of peasants. That was well said."

"It must be done at once or Vladimir is lost," said Alexander.

He had his way. The man who had conquered half Europe seemed suddenly inspired with some

of his former determination. For a day, he was once more the true ruler of the Golden Horde. Sartach quailed before him. Ulvachi was sentenced to the bastinado, as a correction of gluttony. Barka hastily promised anything that was required.

"You thought my time was done," said the old man in a voice of thunder, terrible as he had ever been. "I tell you, I shall be remembered with terror when you are dust. My friend, nay, my son, nay, my most faithful vassal, Alexander Nevski, is here to prove my might. He has shown me how our empire is to be built and kept. You would have destroyed my work, but he shall stand in the place of honour, as prince of Vladimir, and you shall support him, for without him we fall."

Alexander felt that he had delivered the body of Russia bound into the hands of the enemy, in order to save her soul alive. The Mongols would support him only that he should enforce submission. And having to enforce that submission, he must risk suspicion of treachery by his own people. He was called upon now to defend his country not with resistance but with resignation. He remembered the words that he had heard in his boyhood and the hard saying of Bishop Cyril: "To be strong, you must submit; to conquer, you must yield." And he knew at last that this truth demanded the greater courage.

Batu was obeyed. Alexander would go northwards at once with a detachment of Mongols, to

stop Sartach's troops from ravaging Vladimir, after their encounter with Andrei. Then these same Mongols would conduct Alexander to the city of Vladimir, where he would be proclaimed supreme among Russian princes. The old Khan himself speeded the departure.

"Heaven be with you, Nevski," he said. "Mayhap you and I will not meet again. I grow old and feeble. Yet this that I do now in taking your advice may be the best I ever did. I have had great power. Thousands have followed me and thousands have gone down before me. I have seen and heard unimaginable things. But I have not loved any man as I love you. O noblest enemy, remember that!"

"I shall remember with honour, O Batu Khan," said Alexander gravely, "and hereafter may we meet as friends."

§

They went overland by the most direct route.

"Ride, brothers, ride furiously, for here is one with us who wants not to rest by day and cares not to sleep by night, the hardest Rus that ever came to Sarai, worthy to be a Mongol! How he might have gone with us on campaign! What a general to follow! But now he leads not to further slaughter, but to stop it. No matter! He is a brave man, favoured of the Golden Horde and, through him, we shall hold what we have conquered!"

They reached the outposts of Sartach's punitive

expedition and heard that Andrei's little army had been hopelessly defeated and that Andrei himself had fled westward and would probably not be heard of again.

They delivered Batu's command, that no revenge was to be taken on Vladimir. They made it clear that Alexander, as the appointed head of the state, would be responsible for the submission of the people.

And then Alexander was duly escorted by the chief officers to his capital.

No enthusiastic crowds greeted his entry. The Russian boyars, who had plotted revolt with Andrei for their own ends, knew that Alexander was not a prince to be so easily influenced, and, while surprised by the strangeness of this new diplomatic move, only considered how it would affect their own interests. Had the great Nevski, who had proved his valour in Novgorod and Pskov, really made an alliance with his country's chief enemies, and if so, what would be the position of the boyars? Or was he playing a deeper game than theirs had been, and had he now merely come here as the nominee of the Mongols, to foment a stronger revolt? Vladimir, no doubt, would be obliged to submit with him. But meanwhile, Novgorod, which remained free and had not yet known the hateful presence of the enemy, might be secretly informed of the plot, in order to make ready for future resistance, a great resistance, that should be universal and more successful.

The people of Vladimir, who had returned to their newly built capital once and had flocked out of it to fight for their land at the appeal of Andrei and the boyars, were now dead or again hiding in terror from the chance of vengeance. When the survivors heard that the famous Nevski was coming with the Mongols, all they knew was a sense of profound relief. For the patriotism of Alexander Nevski, the hero of the western frontier, could not be questioned. His presence meant the salvation of the land. He was the saint who had surely overcome the powers of darkness or at least had rendered them impotent. So long as Nevski was at Vladimir, Vladimir would not be harmed.

But the people would not acclaim his arrival, except in secret prayers of thanksgiving, because his work there was no concern of theirs. All they asked was to be allowed secure possession of their land, whoever ruled it. All they wanted was that the faith of their fathers, which Alexander had always protected and which the Mongols had, to do them justice, never threatened, should remain immune.

So Alexander, oblivious of the plotting boyars, among whom he found none of his old friends, but deeply conscious of the people's soul, in tune with his own, rode silently into Vladimir and was proclaimed its prince, vassal to the Golden Horde.

And before long, certain boyars became aware of a marvellous opportunity on which their dreams of future power might be founded. Western

Europe was at last awake to the importance of Russia. The Latin Empire had proved its might by gaining control of Byzantium and the Pope of Rome was sending an embassy of two Cardinals to Alexander at Vladimir. So much had never been done for Daniel of Galitch. It meant the definite offer of a treaty against the Mongols. The whole power of Europe would unite with Russia to drive out the pagans, and Holy Russia, preserving her Christianity, need only, in exchange, acknowledge the supremacy of the Pope.

§

This was all that was required of Alexander, as the representative of his country. He read the Pope's letter, when it was delivered to him.

"The greatest ruler is not lessened but exalted through obedience."

Here again was the hard saying, the greater truth, the greater courage.

"Hence, we persuade you, O prince, to recognise the Roman Church as your Mother, to obey her first priest and to bring all your subjects to join us. Know, if you take advantage of our disposition, we will exalt you among other princes to the very pinnacle of glory."

In fact, while recognising Mother Church, forget the natural mother, the Russian land, in which an older creed had taken root and flourished; obey the Pope of Rome rather than the earlier traditions of Greece; lead your people in the same way and

thereby rob them of spiritual freedom. And, as a reward, not only let it be understood that you will be enabled to drive out your enemies, but, by the temporal power of Rome, you will be exalted, on no cross of sacrifice, the guerdon of pure valour; the pinnacle of glory is offered to you, as it was offered once, in the wilderness, to the Son of Man.

He was no Christ to answer, "Get thee hence, Satan." He was merely a young human prince, weighted with cares and responsibilities, realising nothing but the great choice that must now be made, submission to the Mongols or to Rome, temporal enslavement or spiritual enslavement. He was not deceived. On one side, Russia would have to bear the heavy yoke of oriental rule, with all its evils: crushing taxation, foreign customs, a new and probably dreadful change in the state of government gradually forming a despotic precedent which centuries might not alter. And with all this, the religious toleration for which the Mongols were peculiar. On the other side, every worldly advantage: Russia recognised as the greatest of European countries, himself and his heirs as her rulers, the immediate chance of retrieving all disasters. And with this, the abandonment of the faith of his fathers, the necessity that Russia should no longer be Slav but Latin, the whole betrayal of the national characteristic.

To none but a Russian, even more self-conscious at this time than at any later date, could the choice have been so hard. The national characteristic,

then as always, was the religious faith of the people, founded on the implicit belief that theirs was the original and true dispensation. No ancient Naturism could affect it, no modern atheism can influence it, but it would have been undermined by the removal of its control from Greece to Rome.

Cardinal Gald and Cardinal Gemout, those two suave and learned churchmen, were received by Alexander and they spoke to him with all the arts of eloquent persuasion. Listening to them, he was aware of the inferiority of his own intellect. They were so reasonable, so calm, so dignified, so well informed.

And yet they inspired him with profound distrust. He listened to their expressions of sympathy, and his heart revolted against them. He looked on their smooth and implacable faces, and his soul recoiled from them. They informed him of sacred history; they quoted the teachings of the Apostles and the traditions of the Fathers; they enlarged on the conclusions of the seven Ecumenical Councils. But, while enjoining resistance to the pagan Mongols, they avoided any specification of how help would be given to make such resistance possible. And the Word of fellowship and freedom was not in their mouths.

He answered their doctrinal agreements, at last, desperately, falteringly, feeling that he appeared merely obstinate.

"We know these things already. But we cannot recognise your leadership."

They smiled upon him gently and begged him to beware of spiritual pride. Temporal pride was a different matter. His Holiness the Pope could appreciate Alexander's refusal to acknowledge the Khan, which showed courage and independence. But submission to Rome only required the due humility of a Christian.

"His Holiness must be misled if he does not share the common knowledge that I am a vassal of the Mongols," said Alexander quickly and bitterly.

The Cardinals bowed and glanced at one another.

"You are surely aware," Alexander continued, "that I have spent two years in Mongolia, for no other reason than that I was obliged to acknowledge the Great Khan. Therefore you only seek to flatter me by praising my independence. Temporally, Russia is now bound and it seems her fetters cannot be loosed. But spiritually, she must remain free. No peace, power or glory can come to her through Papal supremacy. And I, as her spokesman, must follow the traditions of my ancestors."

"Stay, O prince," said Cardinal Gald. "If you were so long in Mongolia, you must have heard that your revered father, Yaroslav, was, during his sojourn there, converted to Holy Mother Church by the Pope's missioner, Brother John of Piane da Carpine."

"Wherefore," said Cardinal Gemout serenely, "what can prevent you from following the wise example of your martyred parent?"

"I never heard this fact, nor can I believe it,"

said Alexander. "If it be true, show me the record of your missioner. Would not it have been bruited abroad? Would not you have mentioned it to me at once? You say I must have heard of it in Mongolia. If not there, where it is supposed to have happened, rumour is too late in reporting it here and now. Nay, good sirs, do not seek to deceive me further. I have already a heavy yoke to bear and, if it is put upon me honestly, I can go forward. I am no diplomatist to answer you with cleverness to match your own. I am a plain man and a soldier, and I believe that, by trusting the Mongols, who are also plain men, I can best serve my country. As regards my country's faith, we know the history of that faith from the beginning, so why should we listen to new preachers? With your leave, you shall carry that answer in writing from me to the Pope of Rome."

When they found it was impossible to move him, the two Cardinals revealed their true feelings. They called him the associate of pagans and devil worshippers, they said that Russia was accursed with inherent superstition, they prophesied centuries of misery for the land, which through him would sink into the depths of ignorance and despair. Finally they left his presence with black maledictions and he stayed, shaken with nervous excitement, conscious that he had reached at last the end of his strength.

The dead body of his country, ripe for corruption, surely lay outstretched before him. He had sought to preserve her soul. But had she ever had one?

What was her immortality? How had she ever proved it? Wherein lay her virtue or any holiness?

She was no meek nun, perpetually prostrated before her ikons, or faithfully following in the footsteps of her Saviour. She was rather a peasant girl of the streets, warm and laughing, a golden wanton, sitting in a window, smiling and nibbling sunflower seeds, a radiant harlot surrounded by lovers, flinging from her sledge a bunch of violets. She had every grace of the flesh and no shred of modesty. She was at once the desired and the abandoned. Men would die for her gladly, while they hated her evils. She had no virtue, none, but the capacity for loving and for being beloved. She was dark with sin, besmirched with profligacy, with laziness, with dishonesty, with superstition. The only faults she had not were hypocrisy, hardness of heart, self-esteem. Her cloak was humility, and in her hand she carried charity like a lamp. She was the essence of humanity and she adored the Redeemer, Who, for her sake, had suffered.

In that simple adoration alone lay her salvation. It was spontaneous, natural as the adoration of a child, devoid of all self-consciousness but the sense of dependence. For Russia, there was no duty in her love of Christ: it was an instinct. He only was holy, she only was unrighteous. And so aware of this fact was she, that her being was lost in His and His living presence was in her midst.

As Alexander mused thus, there came in to him suddenly his old friend, Bishop Cyril, just arrived

from Novgorod. They had not met, nor had they had word of one another, for several years. Cyril clasped Alexander in his arms, praised Alexander's resistance to the Cardinals and offered help in drafting a written answer to the Pope.

"I would have come to you before, dear son, had it been possible," he said. "But Novgorod required my presence. You have surely had my letters giving news of your family?"

Alexander shook his head and stared with blank eyes.

"I might have known it, since no answer came from you," said Cyril. "Alas, this unhappy country, in which there is little security, has no hope but you. Now, hold fast to courage, beloved prince, for you never needed it more. Your lady mother, Feodosia, has taken the veil and with her has gone your lady wife, Alexandra. Think only that it is best for them thus to find refuge from the world. Both are lost to you, but both had a true vocation for the life they have chosen."

Alexander made a gesture as though to dismiss the subject and still sat silent.

"Your younger sons, Dmitri and Andrei, are safe in the charge of wise tutors, whom I have chosen for them. They will give no trouble; they are quiet, gentle lads, resembling their saintly mother."

"What of the elder boy, Vassili?" muttered Alexander.

"Judge not Vassili harshly. At present he rules in Novgorod. Remember that there has always

been ill-feeling there between the haughty merchants, the rich traders, and the humble craftsmen, the poorer people. Vassili is supported by the boyars and by the city mob, which they control. He and they declare themselves to be the partisans of the place, against all foreign enemies. He and they advocate the liberty of Novgorod. Vassili does not understand the situation. He does not realise that the boyars are the actual oppressors of the people, and that, by encouraging riots, they find profit in disorder. The people are too ignorant and confused to choose a leader of their own or to discover the true cause of unrest. They are consumed with jealousy of Vladimir, which, under you, has accepted the Tartar dominion and has found peace. But Novgorod is different to Vladimir. It has never suffered defeat, it is impatient of the yoke that may be enforced on it and, above all, the people are town dwellers rather than land tillers. The peasants of Novgorod are therefore readier to revolt than the countrymen of Vladimir. And to revolt, Vassili and the boyars may drive them, with condemnation of your policy."

"I cannot see the way," said Alexander. "I know not what I should do. It is dark—dark! Help me, father!"

He rose and groped like a blind man, his face deathly pale, his eyes fixed.

"Vassili ought to stay at Novgorod," he went on rapidly. "He cannot stay except by the will of the people. I have sworn that the enemy shall

not go there. I shall be forsworn. . . . To whom did I pledge my word? Tell me, tell me!"

He staggered and clutched Cyril's arm. "It was Vassilissa. That is all I must know. Tell me, tell me quickly, where is she, where is Vassa?"

"Be calm, my son," said Cyril gently. "What are you saying? I know no woman of that name. You are thinking of your son, Vassili."

"Not Vassili, but Vassa! You know her not at Novgorod? Ah, but you must! I beseech you, one word of her!"

Cyril looked into his face, amazed and silent.

A groan burst from Alexander's lips.

"It is too much!" he cried, and fell unconscious to the ground.

XIX

ALEXANDER lay desperately ill at Vladimir, suffering from what would now be called a nervous breakdown and was then said to be the judgment of God. Loud were the lamentations of the people, and it was recorded that the clergy sent "hot prayers to the Bearer of Health," and that, at last, "the Lord heard the supplications of His slaves."

The prince struggled back to life and reason, after a harder fight than any he had known. From dreadful dreams of encompassing enemies and treacherous friends, from anguish of mind and body, from the depths of the Valley of the Shadow, he returned worn, pale, with whitened hair and deep-set, darkened eyes, and took up his burden.

His courage was undaunted. His spirit was strengthened rather than altered. His memory of all the events that had preceded his illness was clear, and his judgment was keener than ever. It was as though he had been so spiritualised by trial that he was infused with new vitality, a vitality filled with courage, zeal and wisdom.

The feminine name of Vassilissa did not pass his lips, but he spoke long and earnestly of his son, Vassili, to Bishop Cyril, who often wondered how the confusion of names had arisen in the tortured mind, but kept his own counsel.

"It is time that Vassili should contract a good marriage," said Alexander. "Look you, if we were to seek for him the hand of Christina, the daughter

of the King of Norway, then that King, Gakon, would surely agree to protect the neighbouring countries of Novgorod from any further onslaughts of the Scandinavians."

"That is well thought on, dear prince."

"It appears to me an urgent matter. For the Swedes, seeing our plight, will no doubt attack our frontiers again. And, if Novgorod itself is distracted by rebellion, it will fall an easy prey. But it must be protected within as well as without. What is the position at Novgorod now?"

"Alas! it is worse than before. The designing boyars take every chance of evil incitement. They say, 'We will defend our liberties against the cursed eaters of raw flesh. Away with the favourites of the Khan, and all Tartar slaves.'"

"By that, they mean myself?" said Alexander quietly.

"Your name is not mentioned. The people love and remember you too well. Only you could restore order. But the Véché has been prevailed upon to drive out Vassili and summon your cousin Yaroslav, who lately supported Andrei's revolt at Vladimir, and is in ill-favour with the Tartars."

"That is folly. Vassili has been driven out, you say? Yet I thought he sided with the boyars against the people."

"The boyars and the people themselves are divided. One party of the boyars, with Vassili, support a Vladimir man called Mikhalo Stepanovich and counsel peace. The other party, consti-

tuting the ruling Véché, support the Novgorod posadnik, whose name is Anani. If you reinstate Vassili, with the might of Vladimir and with the agreement of the Tartars, you act against the will of Novgorod. The only chance is to prevail over Novgorod by love."

"There is no greater power in the world," said Alexander, and, for a moment, his face was lit with an enthusiasm that made it once more young and fair.

Without further loss of time, he left Vladimir, bound for Novgorod. At a place called Torjok, he encountered Vassili and his partisans. Father and son met in private.

The lad Vassili, handsome as Alexander had been and with the same charm, was flushed with shame and excitement.

"God send that you come to punish Novgorod as it deserves, sir!" he cried. "I am cast out of the place for my loyalty to you. In the Véché you are accused of friendship with the Tartars and what could I do but protest against your condemnation?"

"You would have been better advised not to side at first with those boyars who supported the Vladimir man, Mikhalo Stepanovich," answered Alexander.

"Mikhalo is just and right," said Vassili hotly. "The real villain is Anani, who only seeks power for himself."

"Listen, my son. Anani is of Novgorod and

represents the people. Mikhalo is of Vladimir and therefore cannot represent Novgorod, which has always been jealous of its rights. Therefore, obviously, Mikhalo stands for the power and profit of the boyars, which are opposed to the interests of the small folk. That is the truth as I see it. But, since I come to establish law and order and to restore you, my son, to Novgorod, I shall send a command there to give up Anani and we shall then see what will happen."

Suddenly young Vassili felt immense confidence in his father's power. It was clear to him that, in spite of all that had occurred, Alexander loved and trusted him. And this love and trust inspired Vassili with such devotion and reverence that he felt the influence must extend illimitably and that rebellious Novgorod itself must be swayed by it.

Indeed, as they approached the place, they heard that the temporary prince, Yaroslav, had already fled. But they also heard that the city, bereft of any figure-head but the stout and patriotic burgomaster Anani, was seething with excitement. Already there was another split in the Véché, forming two more opposing parties, one of which swore to die for Anani, and the other vowed to throw him into the river Volkhov and drown him. Some rioters declared him to be their only guardian and defender; others, no less staunch, insisted that he had banished the son of their beloved Alexander and would ruin the town.

When news came in advance of an armed force

drawing near, with Vassili and Mikhalo, the two parties were united by a common impulse of defence. The people worked themselves into a frenzy and declared: "We will defend Novgorod rights and live and die for them! We will not surrender anyone."

Yet when they received Alexander's command to give up Anani, on pain of Alexander's own withdrawal, they were utterly confused. They wanted Alexander, who alone had protected them in the past. They wanted Anani, who promised to protect them from the Tartars and condemned Alexander's present policy. Now Alexander, whom they knew, said to them: "If you will not yield me Anani, I am no longer your prince."

They decided at last to temporise by following the advice of their Archbishop and of their commander, who would both go to Alexander as ambassadors and offer surrender of the burgomaster's person, if the prince would occupy the throne.

Alexander refused to listen to any ambassadors and insisted on dealing direct with the Véché and the sovereign people. It appeared that this very Véché, these very people, were torn asunder and incapable of direct dealing. Yet Alexander felt that only by insisting on a virtue of co-operation which they had not, could that virtue be forced upon them.

His policy was justified. At first there was a sense of dismay at the failure of the ambassadors. Then the people were united in the realisation that

Nevski trusted them alone, that he imputed to them motives that were honourable rather than base.

"It is a sin for those men who have made us risk the displeasure of Nevski," they cried with one voice, and the adherents of both Mikhalo and Anani were again prepared to fall on one another, to prove their own innocence. Excess of zeal was only prevented by Anani, who suddenly turned to protect the life and interest of his rival Mikhalo, and yielded himself to Alexander. The people promptly submitted. All agreed in welcoming their prince to the city, all were satisfied that Mikhalo should be their burgomaster, and all were willing that Vassili should be reinstated.

Once more Alexander entered Novgorod, the place dearer to him than all others. As a conqueror, as a diplomatist, as the champion of his son and the uniter of boyars and people he came. But no beloved woman watched him come—not his mother, nor his wife, nor Vassa whom his heart remembered.

He had no regrets. He held Novgorod in the hollow of his hand and its people worshipped him. He had the whole confidence and devotion of Vassili, and knew that he could inspire his son to be his worthy follower. He had hardly time to consider his two younger boys, Andrei and Dmitri. First, Vassili had to be despatched on campaign against the encroaching Germans of Riga and the Lithuanians, and then Alexander himself had once more to assemble a large force to resist the belligerent Swedes.

Bishop Cyril was at his side, and all was well. In the company of brave comrades, his manhood was entirely revived. He could forget the difficulties of his position with regard to the Mongols. He could remember only Russia and the glory of early victories.

The point of the present attack against old and persistent enemies was to be kept secret. After Cyril had blessed and speeded his army, all that the army knew was that this campaign was only to end in a region where, for six months, the summer sun does not set, and, for another six months, the winter sun does not rise. They were to be led far afield, to the country of the Lopars (eventually known as Lapland), the remotest part of Novgorod possessions, which the Swedes threatened. And they knew that, wherever they went, they could rely on Nevski as their leader.

It was, indeed, one of his greatest campaigns. The only shadow upon it was the weakness of the Novgorod men. They, having marched many miles through a wild and difficult country, were so wearied when the total journey was but half accomplished, that they refused to follow even Alexander further. He sent them back straightway and continued with his own personal adherents. He pushed on through dark forests and desolate swamps, through blizzards and fogs, perpetually harried by rebellious tribesmen, Finns and Lapps. He reached the sea-coast and made it his own, thereby marking for the future the Finnish boundary of Russia. And at

last he returned triumphant, bringing many prisoners, having reduced the whole country to subjection, and having impressed Sweden with his undiminished power.

It was the summit of his career. He was the happy warrior, Nevski the invincible. He had the quality of thoroughness, which marks the great conqueror. His policy allowed no loose ends.

When Vassili was reinstated at Novgorod and Novgorod itself appeared content, when the north-western campaign was victoriously ended and a lesser man might have chosen to rest, he sought out his cousin Yaroslav, who had temporarily occupied Novgorod and had fled thence on his approach, and obliged him to see the wisdom of placating the Mongols. Brother Andrei, who had caused the trouble at Vladimir, had vanished from the scene of action. But Cousin Yaroslav, who had supported Andrei, remained, terror-struck, inconsequent, possibly dangerous, and therefore not to be ignored. Through Alexander's influence, the Khan of the Golden Horde formally forgave Yaroslav, who thereupon was only thankful for the opportunity to vow allegiance and to adopt an inconspicuous attitude.

Through Alexander's influence again, many Russians were freed from arduous service under the Mongol yoke. Every Mongol officer with whom he came in contact showed him special honour. All his requests, referred to Sarai, were granted with a minimum of delay and everything

was done to smooth his way and to show him that the conquerors of his country recognised him as a conqueror of equal worth.

All in fact was very well, till suddenly there came to Vladimir the news that old Batu had died. This was not unexpected. There were few to regret the mighty one, the lone wolf, few besides Alexander, though many wondered who would be proclaimed his successor. They were soon to know. Another death, far more significant, was almost immediately reported from Sarai, the death of Batu's son, Sartach, and with it a rumour that none doubted, the dark rumour that Sartach had been murdered by his uncle Barka.

Alexander remembered well the enmity between those two. There had been nothing admirable in Sartach, and Ulvachi, Batu's favourite, had merely been a greedy cipher under the control of Barka. Now, though Ulvachi might be called Khan, Barka the implacable, the cruel, the dishonest, the worst of Mongols, would be the real ruler of the Golden Horde. In the hands of such a man, Russia must endure terrible oppression.

When a peremptory message, very different in tone from any that had preceded it, came from Sarai, demanding that the vassal prince of Vladimir should come at once to pay new allegiance, Alexander did not hesitate. For the sake of his country, the greater courage enjoined that he should suffer the humiliation of submitting even to the powers of evil.

But he had yet to learn how bitter this humiliation was to be. Where formerly he had been greeted with ceremony, he was now treated like a slave. At the gate of Sarai, his Mongol escort ordered him to dismount and put into his hands a cup filled with kumiss, which he must present, kneeling, as a sign of deference, to the officer who would come out to meet him. He, who had never bowed before any man, was instructed to perform the kow-tow, that Far Eastern prostration, which signified complete surrender.

He flinched, but he obeyed. When the Khan's envoy and retinue appeared, the most dignified figure there was not one of the mounted horsemen, but Alexander kneeling in the dust.

Ulvachi's orders were read aloud to him. He learned that Mangu, the Great Khan, now ruling in the homeland as Kuyuk's successor, imposed complete surrender on the conquered land of Rus, held for him by the Golden Horde. For this purpose, it was commanded here and now that a great census should be taken throughout the country. Every man would be counted and a head-tax would be levied. If any resisted, they might expect the wrath of the Mongols. It was for the vassal prince Nevski to see that there was no resistance. He might now rise and appear before the Khan of the Golden Horde, with further prostrations and presentations, to swear allegiance.

He saw Ulvachi and Barka seated side by side. Ulvachi was half drunk and of no account. But

there was no mistaking the enmity of Barka. He had plotted and killed in order to gain power, and now he meant not only to keep what he had won, but to acquire more. No dream of a united empire would move him, as it had moved old Batu. No good motive would influence him. He was stupid, avaricious, evil, and he would ruin Russia for his own ends.

The only hope, the only chance of survival, was openly to play into the hands of such a man, in order to avert his vengeance and secretly to preserve a nucleus of Russian authority.

XX

THE first point that Alexander gained from Barka was permission to accompany the officials of the Horde, wherever they went, throughout Russia, in the long business of taking the great census. Apparently there was no advantage to his country in this concession, but actually, so wide was his fame, that he knew peace might thus be preserved.

He had no thought for himself. His one object was to devote the whole of his time and strength to the work in hand.

They started northwards and came to Ryazan and Murom. The land was mapped and described, and the tillers of the land, uncomprehending but satisfied of safety, since Nevski was there, were enumerated to a man. It was the same in the cities. The poorer classes did not understand and the richer realised their peril, but both were willing to submit at Alexander's behest. Everywhere dues were imposed on all except the clergy, who were exempt by a plea to Mongol tolerance. Everywhere town and village properties and occupations were thoroughly noted. There would be no respite when the time came for the gathering of tribute from a people hardly recovering from the impoverishment of conquest.

The census takers went on to Suzdal, Rostov and Vladimir, and two years passed before the great task was completed. At Vladimir, the city which

nominally he controlled, Alexander stayed, ready to rush to the help of Novgorod, in case of need, or to go to the succour of any other place, when the Mongol tax-collectors appeared.

Even his vision did not warn him what manner of men Barka would eventually employ in this capacity. He expected that he would have to deal only with Mongols, whom by this time he knew and understood—a truculent, but on the whole, honest race of warriors, with the virtues as well as the vices of nomad tribesmen. He did not realise that the court of the Golden Horde would soon be swarming with unscrupulous adventurers sent from Mongolia, to enrich themselves at the expense of Russia. They would be the scum of the earth, natives of all the conquered territories of Asia, and on the defenceless land to which they would come, Barka would permit them to wreak a vengeance more cruel than any Mongol would inflict. By slavery, by torture and by mutilation they would enforce their rights; and their unjust oppression, as foreign to the true Mongols as to the Russians, would endure for ages and have its counterpart in modern times.

But this horror of darkness was for the future, and, even had Alexander suspected it, he had at present no choice but to obey.

§

At Novgorod, his son Vassili still ruled. The boy's age was now sixteen, and with his girl wife,

Christina of Norway, he felt himself to be a man, no longer requiring his father's support. That father had been the hero of his youthful imagination, but two years' separation, following on long absence and the influence of various boyars, had undermined Vassili's faith. As a child, he had known no family life. A mother entirely devoted to her ikons had left him and his infant brothers to the care of ecclesiastical tutors.

His earliest vital memory was of a splendid young warrior on horseback, whom he was proud to call father, but to whom it has been impossible to show affection, since the radiant vision had vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. All that was left to Vassili was the longing to escape from tedious tutelage and adventure forth, as a soldier, in the company of enterprising boyars.

One of the first of these to encourage him was the Vladimir man, Mikhalo, who, to Vassili's fancy, seemed a worthy friend, since, while burgomaster of Novgorod, he supported the policy of Alexander against the rebellious criticism of the Véché, led by Anani.

That had been a wonderful time for the boy Vassili. He had found himself dispossessed by the people, driven out of the city with Mikhalo and other loyal friends, martyred in the cause of duty. Then suddenly, out of the unknown, that glorious father had reappeared to do him justice. What did it matter that justice was tempered with

criticism? When has triumphant youth ever listened to criticism?

It was true enough that Anani spoke with the voice of Novgorod, the voice of the fickle people, while Mikhalo represented Vladimir and the boyars. Therefore, no doubt, it would have been more politic to deal with Anani, who, in the end, proved after all to be not such a bad fellow. But the great Nevski loved his son more than politics. He had insisted on the surrender of Anani, he had won the people to his way, he had reinstated Vassili and had trusted Vassili to hold Novgorod.

Soon Vassili had gone off on a short and victorious campaign against western enemies, while Alexander had gone further on the brilliant expedition to Lapland. Vassili returned to find a bride awaiting him—Christina of Norway, fair and merry, a good playfellow for a stalwart boy, a promising mate for his maturer manhood. Alexander was there for the wedding ceremony and Vassili could never forget how he had admired his father then. Was there ever such a paladin among princes? His stern expression had melted, for the occasion, leaving his face glad, youthful and altogether lovable. His eyes, no longer hard as ice, were deeply blue and serene. The short russet-coloured beard seemed only flecked with white, as brushwood is touched with hoar-frost. His dignity was infused with geniality and sympathy and with a wistful tenderness. What a father for a boy to follow!

But Vassili had to stay at Novgorod and Alex-

ander could not remain there. Vassili had bitten his lip at the parting, and Alexander had blessed him and had laid an affectionate hand on his shoulder.

"Do not forget me, little son. Be faithful to Novgorod and to your great destiny. You and I must both work for Holy Russia. Your place is here and I must wander further. Remember this, Vassili: I trust you, and your name is dear to me."

Then he had gone, with old Bishop Cyril, who seemed more human than most priests and easier to obey. He had gone without any explanation of those last strange words that the name of Vassili was dear to him, though wise little Christina, appealed to for comfort, suggested that the meaning was obvious: any man loved the name of his first-born.

But Christina was only a girl, and Vassili, at fourteen, still longed for a comrade of his own sex. The burgomaster Mikhalo was at his side. Anani was in retirement. There were many other boyars who proclaimed their devotion to Alexander and their readiness to serve him in devotion to Novgorod.

Some of them had started on the campaign to Lapland and had been unhappily forced to return before it was over. They would now prove that their spirit had been willing enough to endure any hardship and only Nevski had mistaken the weakness of their flesh. What Nevski had accomplished with his own personal followers had been miraculous, but, as veterans, they rather thought it would

be the last he could do. The strain had been too great, beyond human strength. It was tragic that the splendid Nevski should attempt to go on and risk failure. Vassili would see. . . . They shook their heads with dismal foreboding.

After a time came the news that Alexander had been harshly summoned from Vladimir to the Horde. A new Khan ruled at Sarai and demanded the utmost submission of Russian princes. Surely Alexander's pride would prevent him from going?

On the contrary, he had hastened to obey. Novgorod growled at the affront to its hero and Vassili burned with shame.

Then came further news, more disturbing still and exaggerated by rumour. Alexander had been shamefully treated and insulted by the Mongols. His spirit had been broken by torture, and he had been forced to yield the last shred of his country's independence. No longer would he be able to claim any title of government. The Horde had complete control and would appoint its own rulers, under the name of Tsars. The new despotism would be introduced by the systematic enslavement of the people, whose names and property were to be noted for the purpose in a great census. And, worst of all, Nevski had been obliged to lend his aid to this horrible design.

Novgorod was in a turmoil at the idea. Its prince, its boyars and its people were, for a time, united by indignation even more closely than by

Alexander's past influence. Then dissension arose among them again as to the best means of meeting the danger.

The burgomaster, Mikhalo, with some experience of peaceful Mongol suzerainty at Vladimir, advised patience. No one would listen to him. A cry went up that Anani should be recalled. Anani had lately died, and Mikhalo was cast out of the Véché and delivered to the city mob, who drowned him in the river Volkhov.

Vassili was eager to lead an expedition to the rescue of his father.

"The enemy is strong and we are few," he declared, weeping with excitement. "Yet let us go forth and strike a blow for freedom. Do not we owe past freedom to Nevski and shall not we acquit ourselves like men now, for his sake?"

A few of the boyars agreed with him, but more, thinking only of their own property, hesitated. These were willing to retain Vassili as a figurehead and persuaded him to abandon an idea which was too risky.

"We cannot hope to free Russia by going out against the Tartars, O prince. All that we can do is to remain here and preserve the liberty of Novgorod. Thus it may be kept as a haven of refuge for Alexander and thus the will of the people will be fulfilled."

Meanwhile, the commander of the fortress and the more adventurous spirits were driven out of the place. The people were determined to hold

the city against the enemy and Vassili told them that he would live and die in that cause.

"When my father left me here," he cried, "these were his words: 'Be faithful to Novgorod.' I will obey him to the end!"

The Véché acclaimed him with enthusiasm and, in the crowd, one old man held up his hand and shouted: "Long years ago, our prince, Alexander Nevski, swore that no enemy should ever enter Novgorod. It is for you, Prince Vassili, to keep that promise now."

"I will surely keep it," answered Vassili. "If the enemy comes in force, we will resist him. If my father himself, enslaved and broken, leads the enemy here, we will rescue him and resist still more furiously."

Thus, blindly driven by the selfish fears of the boyars and the ignorance of the people, the sixteen-year-old lad stumbled on towards his fate.

§

From Vladimir, at this time, Alexander despatched a letter to his son:

"God give you courage and wisdom. I rely on your help, knowing well that your position at Novgorod will be difficult. You must understand that we are a conquered people, but that, by submission and patience, freedom can still be preserved. If we resist, all is lost. Mongol officials will come to enumerate the inhabitants and property of Novgorod, as they have done in other places. My

duty here prevents me personally from accompanying them, but my representatives will go with them to protect the interests of the place. I adjure you to give the Mongols every assistance in their work, so that their resentment may not be aroused. If Novgorod is rebellious, send word to me immediately, and I will leave all to come to you. If I do not hear from you, I shall know that you can control the situation."

This letter never reached Vassili. The man who carried it, a faithful friend of Alexander, was attacked by starving robbers during his journey through the winter night, and his stripped corpse was thrown into a snowdrift.

With no reassuring message, Vassili's belief in his father's impotence was confirmed.

With no reply from Vassili, and no knowledge of the accident, Alexander felt confident of his son.

The Mongol officials came to Novgorod with Alexander's adherents of Vladimir. For the jealous Novgorodians, the presence of these rival citizens was a case of insult added to injury. Alexander himself had gone to other cities, but now he held aloof from Novgorod, and deputies were chosen by the Tartars who controlled him.

A large and turbulent crowd filled the streets, jostling the horsemen and uttering imprecations against them. The populace seemed to have no leader, but they were united by a common impulse of revolt. There was apparently no control in the

city. If there was any present burgomaster, there was no means of ascertaining his name or whereabouts.

The Vladimir men, in danger of their lives from the menacing mob, led the way to the royal palace and forced an entrance on Vassili and his attendant boyars. Here they explained urgently that consideration must be shown to the Mongols and that facilities for the taking of the census must be arranged.

"Tell the accursed eaters of raw flesh that I am here by the will of free Novgorod," answered Vassili proudly, "and that I will do nothing to curtail the liberty of the people."

"It is the command of Prince Alexander Nevski that the Mongols be treated with respect."

"Rather it is their command which my father has been forced to obey! Novgorod remains independent."

Now the chief Mongol official, or baskak, a blunt old soldier called Argaman, joined them.

"Who is in authority here?" he asked peremptorily. "The order must be given to clear the streets."

"That will not be easily done," said a young courtier with studied indifference. "Here, the authority is not that of the ruling prince, but of the Véché, which consists mainly of the people."

"The Véché must be summoned."

The young courtiers tittered.

"The people summon themselves to meet in the

Court of Yaroslav and thus form the Véché. But wherever they are collected together, they decide how to deal with their enemies."

"Then the Khan's order is to be disobeyed and his emissaries flouted?"

"Tartar emissaries will be lucky if they are merely flouted in Novgorod," said Vassili.

"This is a case for troops," said Argaman. "We shall see what Novgorod will say when the census is taken by an armed force."

He turned angrily away and Vassili's cry followed him: "We shall say then what we say now! We are ready to die for our liberties."

The Mongols pressed their way out of the city, through the swaying, muttering crowd, which at any moment might decide to drag them down and only by chance refrained. The Vladimir men remained behind, partly for fear of risking their lives in the streets again, partly for the purpose of attempting pacific counsel.

Very soon Argaman rejoined Nevski. The baskak was so enraged that it was difficult to gather what had actually happened from his incoherent account. He accused Alexander of having sent him into a hornets' nest. It was deliberate treachery. Nevski, who knew the temper of Novgorod, should have prepared the way. It was impossible to take any census there. The case should be reported to the Golden Horde and Barka Khan should be asked to send a punitive expedition to bring Novgorod to submission. Meanwhile, Argaman intended to

collect a Mongol force in Vladimir and return straightway to a preliminary attack.

It was a shattering blow to Alexander's policy. For a moment he was paralysed, in despair.

"O Vassili, my son Vassili, how have you failed me!"

Then, as always, he recovered, forgot himself, remembered only his country, took control of the situation.

"Believe me, Argaman, I attempted to prepare the way for you. Novgorod, having never known invasion, is different to all other cities. Its people are proud and naturally rebellious. Either my behest was disregarded or it has gone astray. Until this is discovered, refrain from making any report to Barka Khan. But, as it is just that Novgorod should submit, permit me to go there with you, so that, if possible, I may bring the people to see reason and bloodshed may be averted."

"A little blood-letting would do Novgorod no harm," grumbled Argaman. "And, as for your son Vassili, and his precious friends, they must be delivered for punishment."

"If Vassili is guilty, he will be judged," said Alexander in a low voice.

They departed at once. Vassili, thought his father, must have been driven out, as before, by the excited people. There must have been some dreadful misunderstanding. Vassili would surely come to meet him and explain all, before they reached Novgorod.

Instead, as they approached the city, various messengers came, bringing various confusing tidings. First that the turmoil continued and that a new burgomaster had been elected and almost instantly murdered. Prince Vassili, aware that the Mongols were returning, was at the head of the disturbance, and egged on by the younger boyars had proclaimed to the people: "The Tartars are bringing fetters to put on us. Let us die for the liberties of Novgorod rather than suffer enslavement like Alexander Nevski, who was once unconquerable!"

"Ah! Vassili, little Vassili, I trusted you! Could not you have trusted me?"

Then another message followed swiftly. Prince Vassili's courage had failed and he had fled to Pskov, taking with him his wife and his favourite friends, but leaving his young brothers behind. The ecclesiastics in charge of these boys had prevailed on the people to surrender to the Mongols. Novgorod sent greeting to the baskak Argaman with these words: "Honour from us to the Khan and to you. We have gifts for him and for you also."

Bitter scorn possessed Alexander's heart. It was too contemptible. They had no wisdom, they had no courage. Vassili could not be left lurking at Pskov, with the boyars, who were probably the chief cause of the trouble. In fact, Argaman insisted that they should be recalled and duly punished.

"If that happens, will the people of Novgorod be safe?" said Alexander.

"Assuredly, since you will stay to keep order."

"Will my son's life be forfeit?"

"You may judge your son, as you see fit."

"I thank you for that. And his friends, the boyars?"

"They deserve death. Do you wish it?"

"I wish for no man's death."

"Then leave them to me. They shall pay for their insolence according to Mongol law."

The payment exacted was indeed horrible. Alexander was able to save Vassili by ordering him to be banished to Suzdal; but before the boy was sent away under guard, he and his father were obliged to witness the cruel punishment of the boyars, in a fashion foreign to Russia but not unknown in the rest of mediæval Europe. One had his eyes put out, one had his hand cut off, another had his tongue torn out, another was cropped of his ears. Thus mutilated, they were turned out of Novgorod, where the people, eager now to placate the Mongols, were oblivious of all but their own escape.

Sickened and anxious, Alexander sat once more in his own palace and to him came Vassili for a parting interview. The boy's face was colourless and agonised. His hands were clenched at his sides and he stared at his father with hatred.

"Vassili," said Alexander gently, "I have only this to say to you. Do not remember evil against me."

Vassili drew a sobbing breath.

"I will remember it all the days of my life," he

cried. "I will never forget how you have shamed me. You can be no father of mine. You, who have forgotten God and consort with the accursed, what have I to do with you? Why did you save my life that it should be a misery to me? You could have saved my friends or you could have allowed me to suffer with them. There can be no forgiveness for the injury you have done me."

"Be silent, son. You know not what you say."

"I will not be silent. I know the truth and I am not enslaved. In Novgorod they call you Nevski, the saint, the hero. Still they call you that, though you have betrayed Novgorod to the enemy, though you have brought the enemy here and are thus forsworn. Nay, I *will* speak! Is not that true? Did not you swear long ago that the enemy should not come to Novgorod?"

Alexander bowed his head.

"You cannot deny it," raved Vassili. "And now, for the sake of the mob, you sacrifice my honour and your own. What is the value of the mob? It is unstable as water. What is the worth of the people? Less than nothing."

"Listen, boy. Even if that were so, princes are responsible for their people. That they may survive, to preserve the land and the nation, all else must go, love, life, everything. Vassili, cannot you see that?"

There was a pause. Alexander held out his hand. The boy seemed torn between his pride and the desire to fling himself at his father's feet

and burst into a passion of tears. Finally, his face was distorted by a sneering grimace.

"I can only see your weakness," he howled and, with an arm over his eyes, he stumbled from the room.

XXI

THE character of a mob, even when it expresses the instinct of national self-preservation, is not the character of a people.

Novgorod, now in the hands of the mob, had no longer any virtue of honesty, dignity, or the capacity for judgment. It was possessed by a soulless mass, driven only by fear. This mass had neither faith nor patience. But, by weight of numbers, it had a brutish strength, to which the lowest elements lent vitality. The place was like a boiling cauldron, where the actual contents are lost to view, while the scum rises to the surface. The scum had the odour of reality and was urged into evidence by a genuine spirit of freedom. But its own material was worthless. Its own nature was vicious and corrupt.

Novgorod was relieved to escape Mongol vengeance and desired that Alexander should remain to confirm its safety. It was ready to promise anything, so long as it was not troubled further. It accepted from its prince the appointments of a new burgomaster and a new military commander, to replace those whom it had murdered or dispossessed, for these appointments gave the people a fictitious sense of independence.

But the people themselves, submerged by the passion of the mob, were incapable of reason. Though they had learned from the men of Vladimir that revolt would be useless, though they knew that

they must submit to the Mongols and agree to the taking of the census, they had no intention of keeping any promise. They would pay allegiance to none. They would not even obey Nevski.

He, pale and tight-lipped since that dreadful parting with his son, clinging to the belief that the people loved him, but chiefly conscious of his duty to them, advised the Mongol officials to begin and carry on the necessary work as soon as possible. Directly it was started, he realised that he had to deal with no faithful and intelligent subjects, but with an obstinate and stupid herd. Ominous crowds, the men armed with sticks and the women with stones concealed in their hands, filled the streets, swaying and murmuring.

Alexander rode at the side of Argaman, at the head of a posse of officers. The Mongols were to be billeted on certain houses, but there was danger even in reaching these abodes.

"The pagans are among us," muttered the mob. "How can the saints help us, if we support them? See how haughtily they bear themselves, the accursed! Why should they be proud? Their only protection is Nevski."

If a horse should stumble, if a stone should be thrown, there would be disaster. He would be powerless to protect the Mongols, nor could he save his people from the awful vengeance that must follow.

At last, the officials were, without accident, under

cover for that night. But next day they must issue forth and go from street to street, from house to house, to take the census.

The present burgomaster, trembling for his own life, approached Alexander and told him that the census would never be permitted. The people had sworn to put every difficulty in the way and to kill the first man who should attempt to obtain information.

"Precautions will be taken," said Alexander wearily. "I will send my own guards to escort the officers."

"The baskak, Argaman, is especially threatened, O prince. He may even be slain in the house where he stays."

"Then you or your son must remain at his side, night and day, to protect him."

"What could I do, sir? My son is a favourite of the people, but you would not ask me to sacrifice him."

"Have not I sacrificed my son for the common welfare?" said Alexander with a terrible look.

"True, O prince. And for that the people are grateful. But they will listen to no one else. They trust you blindly, they believe you are true to them and they say they will save you from the Tartars, who have forced you to forget your oath that the enemy should never come here."

"O my God," cried Alexander, "why am I pursued with those words? How is it known that I ever uttered them? Who has borne them in mind?

Tell me, man, tell me, how is this thing remembered against me?"

"Prince, I do not know. It is a saying in the city. It must have begun when men recalled your past conquests."

"Or else there is a woman in it," muttered Alexander to himself. He shuddered and pulled himself together.

"Look you, posadnik, the people have no gratitude. They neither trust me nor believe in me. But I will show them that I do not fear them. For their sakes, I will stay beside Argaman."

Yet he knew, even as he spoke, that he would fail. The Mongols themselves were realising that the task was impossible and threatened to abandon it altogether. This meant that they would retire only to come again with an armed force and subdue rebellious Novgorod.

The mob, with the religious faith of the people behind it, was working itself into a state of fanatical frenzy. As its watchword, it had adopted the phrase: "We will die for Holy Sophia!" It was aware, with the only sense it had, that the life of the city was founded on its faith. The centre of that faith was the great ancient cathedral of Saint Sophia. This was all the mob knew. And so bereft of wisdom was it, that it saw no contradiction in risking the very existence of its most sacred edifice by the repetition of its watchword. If Novgorod fell to the might of the Mongols, its cathedral, like the old cathedrals of Kiev, of Vladi-

mir, of innumerable other places, would become a smouldering ruin.

Old Argaman stood at a window with Alexander, looking out at the seething multitude in the Court of Yaroslav. A burly peasant, with a shock of tow-coloured hair and the expression of a snarling beast, was addressing the crowd, like any mob orator.

"Shall not we resist the pagans, to the death, brothers? Whoso is just, let him join us! The rich command to count our heads. We are betrayed by princes. They make everything easy for themselves, but evil for small folk! Is this according to the Orthodox faith? Is this even justice?"

A roar answered him: "We will die for the faith and for justice!"

"You see," said Alexander to Argaman with a twisted smile, "that I am regarded as the betrayer of the people and that, consequently, I am hated, for the moment, as much as yourself."

"For the moment, perchance. But they would be satisfied with our blood. If I had five hundred warriors here, I would show them. As it is, I will go and bring back ten thousand. Then they shall learn to obey. Once you begged mercy for this place, Nevski. You will hardly ask it now."

"As man to man, let me tell you this," said Alexander. "If I had my way, I would first kill every Mongol in Novgorod and then every ringleader of the rebels who have flouted me. I would rule with a rod of iron and I would gather my people

together and rouse Russia to throw off the foreign yoke. You and I are soldiers, Argaman. Therefore we know that such action is impossible. You are now supreme. And I, for the life of Russia, must now submit. All I ask is, that in view of my difficulty, you will leave Novgorod and give me time to bring the people to subjection. Give me another chance, before you return with your ten thousand warriors. There has been no bloodshed yet. But if, when you come again, there is any opposition to the census, the only mercy I will ask is that I may be the first to die."

"We Mongols know how to value brave and honest men," said Argaman gruffly. "It shall be as you say. We will depart and not come again till next year. But you deserve a better fate than to give your life for this country and these people."

"In days to come," said Alexander, "I think your race will only be remembered for the evil they have done here, and for their connection with us. My country and my people will endure—ay! though their torment be long, though they be forgotten or maligned or scorned. Holy Russia is immortal and her soul shall not perish."

Like a martyr, he held to his faith, though it was slipping from him. He heard the roar of the insensate crowd, he was aware already of insidious corruption throughout the country. How could such a people survive? How could there be any resurrection for a body politic so doomed to death?

He was not deceived by the restoration to order,

which at once followed the Mongol withdrawal from Novgorod. The turbulent element of the place was, he knew, merely concealed, because Novgorod had gained its own way. The people could have no real love for him, or they would have obeyed him in the hour of danger.

When he told them this, in the Véché, they murmured again like spoiled children. They wanted him to be their figure-head, without trusting him with any control. They could no longer believe him to be a partisan of the enemy, but his association with the Mongols aroused their lingering suspicions.

"Stay with us, Nevski, stay always!" they said. "For only thus can we be saved. But do not ever bring the pagans here again."

They treated this matter of frightful moment as though he had attempted on them an ill-judged practical joke.

"It is impossible that I should stay always. I must go to Vladimir, for that is the appointment I hold. From Vladimir I shall have to come again with the Mongols in force. The census is not abandoned, but deferred. For the love of God, see reason. It can do you no harm to be enumerated; but if you resist again, the whole city will be ruined. Do not you care what becomes of Novgorod? Are its churches, its shrines, its palaces, its volosts nothing to you? Have you forgotten what happened in the past to other Russian cities, as rich and more beautiful? Do you want your blood to

run in the streets? You can only prevent it by a submission that shall preserve your strength for the future."

He could see that they believed his policy was inspired by fear instead of wisdom. With low cunning they tried to entrap him into an admission that it was better to die for liberty than to live enslaved. The purpose of the census was surely that they should be heavily taxed. Where would their freedom be then? How could they ever recover from the crushing yoke?

"Taxation cannot kill you. It will be a spur to make every man work to the utmost and thereby increase his strength. It is easy to throw away life. It is harder to endure it. Cannot Novgorod, which alone of Russian cities has escaped so far, choose the harder way, and thus shine like a beacon throughout the land?"

They did not want the harder way. They were determined not to be taxed. The people had a keener sense of property and were more acquisitive than any boyars, and loudly proclaimed that they would rather die than yield.

"But if you die you yield all, while if you live you only yield a share."

That made no difference. They insisted that they would yield nothing: they would prefer to die. It was like speaking to idiots or to deaf animals. They gazed at Alexander out of their soft blank eyes, and wagged their heavy heads and folded their long arms defiantly. It struck him

that if their obstinacy were in a better cause, there would have been about it something splendid. As it was, it was merely the selfish greed of the ignorant, the instinct for immediate gain of the untutored. No education had developed in them a national soul.

It was doubtful whether there was even an individual spark of vitality, which further experience might fan into a flame. If such a spark existed, hot from the natural source of peasant patience, peasant slowness, peasant devotion to the land, then what material for greatness was here!

He could only leave them now, praying them at least to be faithful to his young sons, who were obliged to stay there. Dmitri would be their prince; he, Alexander, could only be their intercessor. But, before he departed from Novgorod, he paid a visit to the convent where his mother and his wife had retired.

Alexandra refused to see him. News had reached her of Vassili's disgrace. She believed the worst of a husband whom she had known so little. He had resisted the pagans of the west, but he was surely in league with the pagans of the east. She had sacrificed everything, even her vocation for the veil, even the sacred ikon that had belonged to the holy Mother Euphrosinia, in order to bear his sons for a splendid destiny. She had no delusions about the two younger boys, who were timid and retiring like herself. But Vassili would surely have followed in his father's footsteps as a conqueror. And

from jealousy or spite, or the fact that Alexander had sold himself to the devil, Vassili had been betrayed and banished.

The heart of Alexandra, always a fragile thing, was broken. The world, which she had always detested, was now safely shut out, and she had no desire even to regard it from a distance, as her sainted relative had looked on it from the window of her cell. It was far better to keep her eyes fixed on her ikons, to forget all but the blessed and immortal figures of Paradise, framed in precious metals, enamel and jewels. How calm and radiant they were, how far above humanity and, if not so beautiful as the wonderful picture she had given to the cathedral of Toropetz, how they recalled that vision without its disturbing influence, which even Mother Euphrosinia had equally been obliged to hide from sight!

By a strange chance, the dowager princess Feodosia had adopted the name of Euphrosinia on her entrance to the convent. But unlike the first Euphrosinia, she now found peace freed from all regret.

She came quickly to greet her son, and as he knelt to kiss her hand, she trembled with joy, and, raising him, gazed up into his eyes.

"It is you, it is indeed you, my Alexander," she whispered. "You have suffered, you are older, but you are still the same."

"Always the same, little mother. A rough man for the world, but for you a boy in need of comfort."

"Now I know that God is merciful," she said. "Come sit beside me and I will tell you all." She drew him down on to a wooden bench, and remained silent for a moment, with hands clasped in her lap, looking at him. "It is so wonderful for me to see you again, my son. I did not expect this great joy. Your father, Yaroslav, surely led you here."

Her expression was at once spiritual and beautifully human. Her rough robe seemed to clothe a body that had shrunk, till it was very small and delicate. But her transparent face, smooth as fine porcelain, appeared to be lit from within by a flame of pure love.

"To think," she murmured, "that I should be granted this happiness twice over! . . . Listen, Alexander! I will tell you how it was. When I was young and foolish, I played a prank on your father—O, not a very wicked prank, only what a child might do. And the result was sorrow. First sorrow, and afterwards a little triumph and then sorrow again, because the triumph was empty. And I turned to God, and God forgave me my silly prank and sent me you."

"Assuredly no child was ever happier in his home, little mother."

"Ay, we were happy, though in your father's eyes was ever a tragic look. And that look irked me, Alexei, so that I did not comfort him as I should have done. I was light-hearted. I loved the world too well, and it even seemed to me that he was too good."

"He was indeed a saint," said Alexander, "but not cold, like some saints of this earth."

"Ah! my son, I would never have chosen such an one for you. No matter. Yaroslav knew great grief and I did not understand. We Russians are said to be a sad people, Alexei. But it is not so. We rejoice more easily, we sing and we dance and only because we are very human do we laugh and weep by turns. Some of the world still clings to me and now I know it is not wrong. For true faith is a happy thing. And I have found it here. When your father left us, I was content with you and your wife and, as they came, with my grandchildren. When I heard that your father had died, I knew I must retire from the world I loved to pray for the peace of his soul. Yet as I prayed I thought: 'The only bond between Yaroslav and me is Alexander. Parted from Alexander, how can Yaroslav and I be reunited?' Then it came to me that your father had died no common death. We knew that he had been murdered by the enemy, but what was the reason of this murder? It could only be that he had given his life for us, that he had sacrificed himself willingly for his love."

"It may have been so."

"It was surely so. I knew how well he cared for Novgorod and for you, but at first I could not believe that I had remained in his heart also, that there could be any reunion for us in this thought. Then, since you had followed in his footsteps, I felt that his influence would prevail. If you returned

to me, he would still be leading you. He who gave you to me once would give you to me again, to show that he loved me still."

"Little mother, would I could have come sooner. Would I could stay always near you now."

"He has brought you," she said. "It is enough. And thus, in the spirit, we three can never more be apart. In the life of the spirit, love is supreme. I grow old, my son, yet at heart I am young and glad. My body wears this garb of retirement, but my soul goes gaily in a flowered gown, to please the eyes of my dear ones, and God smiles to see it. Here," and she laid her hands on her breast, "is the place where you are a baby again, Alexander, before ever your yellow curls were shorn. And here is your father, laughing to see you, and I, singing a little merry song, to keep you both."

"When I am tired and the world seems hard, I shall remember that happy place."

"Remember it," she said, "but take other joy where you may find it. Do not deny love. Remember you have this home, with your father and me, but do not come again. For God's world is still beautiful, as beautiful as God's peace, and you may still know both as I do." She leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the cheeks. "Go, dearest," she said. "I am satisfied. Perchance, I shall live here for many more years, dividing my time between prayer and care for the sick and aged. Perchance I shall not stay long. Yet, wherever I may be, I shall not be alone."

He left her seated in an attitude of dignity and grace, that stayed in his mind like the aspect of a fresh-plucked lily diffusing its fragrant strength in a shadowed room.

XXII

It was mid-winter when fresh Mongol troops, under two important envoys from the Horde, came to join the baskak Argaman at Vladimir, and to conduct him once more to Novgorod for the taking of the census.

Alexander was forced to accompany them, and the officials insisted that he should take a further body of Russian troops, for their protection. To his own force of Vladimir men, regiments from Rostov and Suzdal were added. It was believed that this great show of strength would so alarm Novgorod that conflict might be avoided.

But Novgorod would not be frightened into submission.

The troops entered a city as stubborn as ever and more tense with excitement than before. A strange hush lay over the place, like a storm cloud which at any moment might burst. In the wide snowy streets, few people appeared, but the fences and gateways of houses were barricaded with bags of earth and iron bars, and any men in evidence wore armour and carried weapons. This was not to be the mere rebellion of a mob, though undoubtedly the mob, consisting of every living soul, civilians, women and children, armed with sticks and stones, lurked in the background. The people of Novgorod, its boyars and its artisans, its warriors and its merchants, united in a common purpose, were determined to resist Mongol supremacy to the death.

Alexander's heart was sick within him. He loved these people and hated them at the same time. Their courage inflamed him and he saw that it was empty and useless. It was like a glorious boast which would prove their undoing. It was like a sword which must break in their hands and like a cup of poison which they pressed upon each other. A bloody encounter between the Mongols and the Novgorodians was inevitable. Nothing could prevent the fatal issue, neither his personal influence nor the possible sympathy of his Russian troops. His own end must be to fall on that broken sword, to share that poisoned cup, for he had sworn not to survive the tragedy.

The troops, perfectly disciplined, perfectly organised, marched through the empty thoroughfares to advertise their presence and their power. Finally, since any attempt to occupy the fortress would precipitate attack, they bivouacked in the streets, while Alexander led the officials to his own palace.

It was decided that for twenty-four hours a truce should prevail. The taking of the census should not be tried till Novgorod had time to realise the alternative. If Novgorod opened battle first, it could, of course, expect no mercy.

The trembling burgomaster, summoned to the palace and speaking for the Véché, agreed to this proposition.

That night, prayers never ceased to rise to Heaven from the cathedral of Saint Sophia. The clerics of Novgorod knew that the holy place was doomed,

by the voices of the great congregation that filled it and repeated: "We will die for the faith!" In a pomp that concealed their agony of apprehension, in the jewelled robes that would be stripped from their fallen bodies, the priests of the Orthodox Church besought a miracle of God, and, by their ministry, deferred the moment when only such a miracle could save them.

Alexander had been permitted to send his young sons to the shelter of the convent that housed the princess Alexandra and his mother, Feodosia, and had been assured by the Mongols that this convent should, if possible, escape their vengeance. But none could say what would happen when the storm burst. From knowledge of the ruin that had overtaken other cities, it seemed too much to hope that even one building should here remain immune.

For Alexander, there could be no present rest or respite from anxiety. He left his palace that night, driven forth by the agony of his thoughts, and wandered alone through the streets, that had taken on the aspect of an armed camp, and yet still had a desolate atmosphere, pregnant with suspense.

Round the bivouac fires of dried dung, men crouched like uneasy shades, and groups of tethered horses stood together with bowed heads, like the figments of some dark dream. These visible beings seemed less real, less tangible than the invisible force of a people's resistance. It was a city of ghosts, in which Alexander felt impelled to seek urgently for something vital.

Scarcely knowing where he went, he crossed a bridge over the river and came into the deserted commercial quarter, where all was still as death. Snow began to fall, and still he plodded on.

With an inner consciousness, separate from his mind, he reflected: "I know not what I am doing. I cannot think. My body is escaping from Novgorod. It cares for nothing. It knows that there is no more hope. I cannot help it. My flesh will continue till it is worn out. Then I shall fall by the wayside and sleep, and the snow will cover me."

When he reached the suburbs, he was not aware of it. Here, beside the wide trackless road, a few poor scattered izbas lay behind wooden fences. He left these habitations behind and the wind blew the thick snowflakes into his eyes, till he was blinded, and into his nostrils till he gasped for breath.

Now it seemed that within him two beings struggled for supremacy. One wanted him to return and save itself, morally and physically. The other, an instinct of opposition, urged him on to do battle with the elements, which it confused with a material enemy. The wind was the power of the Tartars, the whirling snowflakes were their arrows.

"Forward, Nevski, and conquer!" cried the warlike spirit. And the first spirit seemed to shriek and die.

Suddenly, in the darkness, he staggered against a paling, groped and turned through an opening towards a small isolated building, marked by a glimmer of light. The light drew him forward.

He had no conscious desire to reach it, he had no wish for shelter, but he found himself in a doorway and fell to his knees on the threshold. A watch-dog barked.

He thought: "This time, I cannot conquer. Now I shall sleep here. But the snow will not cover me."

He closed his eyes and heard a distant faint sound of music, to which memory supplied the words of an old song:

> "He saw her, the youth, and must escape her,
> From Sorrow he fled to the coffin-box,
> To the coffin lid to his little grave mound,
> To his little grave in the grey dun earth,
> And Sorrow followed him.
> She tracked him out, in her hand her shovel,
> In her hand her shovel and drove in her carriage.
> 'Stand and deliver, avaunt not champion!' "

With failing breath, he called aloud: "Vassa, O Vassa, I have found you!"

He pulled himself upright and beat feebly on the door with both hands. Presently it was opened to him. He reeled forward into a poor, low-roofed room, dimly lighted but adequately warmed by a stove.

Under a crude ikon, set high in one corner, a lady had risen from a wooden stool. Her face was in shadow, but the gleam of a cresset lamp showed her figure in a straight dress of faded red silk, that brought a note of incongruous past splendour into those surroundings.

Alexander hardly glanced in her direction. He wiped the thawing snow from his eyes and looked wildly round, seeking the remembered form of Mikula. An old peasant woman, grey and bent, was closing the door behind him.

"Where is she?" he gasped. "Where is Vassilissa? I heard her voice."

Next moment, the lady in the red dress was crouching at his feet, holding his chilled hands in her warm ones and pressing her cheek against them.

"I am here, dear lord, I am here," he heard her say in a tone of ecstasy.

And he saw the lovely face that had smiled in the streets of Novgorod, as vivid now as then, unchanged but for a greater delicacy, a more subtle character. Her thick russet-coloured hair, little longer than a man's, framed the face like a burning cloud. Her large dark eyes brimmed with tears and her full lips quivered. As a woman, he had never known her, and now the sense of her feminine presence, with its soft strength, its fragrant charm, enveloped him with a sense of new sweet faintness.

She sprang upright and supported him with a resolute arm.

She summoned the old woman: "Maria, help. My lord is weary."

She led him to a seat near the stove and pulled off his heavy boots and his sodden cloak. She brought him tea from a steaming samovar and laid a ragged cloak of sheepskin over his knees.

Her ministrations were like those of a mother, deft and consoling. He watched her and knew nothing but the wondering contentment of the moment. He felt that God had guided him to a place where he could rest.

When she had done everything possible for him, she retired noiselessly to the corner below the ikon, beyond his vision. The old woman replenished the stove with wood and then left the room. Stillness, broken only by the blasts of wind round the log building, reigned.

As his numbed faculties recovered their use, the lull of security passed from Alexander's mind. He no longer desired to sleep. He became painfully aware of his surroundings. What was he doing here, far from the city? He had deserted Novgorod, if not in the hour of its greatest need, at a time when that hour was imminent. He must return, O he must return immediately. He threw off the sheepskin, rose and met the eyes of Vassilissa.

"I have found you," he said, "and I must leave you. Only tell me first of yourself."

She sat, without moving, like a holy image.

"You said to me, 'Go, and sin no more,' my lord. I went back to Novgorod and gave away all I had in charity. Then, rather than retire to a convent, for I still loved the world, I came here to live alone with an old servant. I repent the past. I thought my penance must be that I should never see you again. But Christ is merciful. That is all my story."

"It is complete and perfect," he answered. "I have never forgotten you. But in my mind you had another guise. Now, I know there is no greater saint than you—nay, not in all Russia! And your reward is in Heaven."

"Heaven is happiness," she said. "I am happy in this hour, though I am still a sinner in the eyes of God. It is you who are blessed. It is you who will be remembered as a saint."

"Ah! speak not to me of the judgment of the world, the flattery of the crowd. Let there be truth between us, Vassa. In the past, the people have acclaimed me as their champion and saviour, because I led them in the way that they would go. In the hour of trial I have failed, for I can no longer control them. I put my trust in the Most High and rejoiced to think that I did not succeed alone. Then, with years, perhaps pride overtook me. I depended on my own strength, I turned from love, my heart shrivelled within me. I tell you, if I had not been so self-righteous, if I had had more humanity, who knows, I might still have been supported; the people might still have heeded my words."

"They love you still," said Vassilissa, bending forward, so that the light fell on her serious, beautiful face.

"Nay, there is no love between us now. We cannot go back. My heart is dead like a dried leaf, withered like the state of Russia. There is no soul in me or in these people. We are poor in

spirit. We mourn the days that are gone. We are crushed by misfortune and can never rise again."

He put his hand over his eyes and turned away and, in the Russian phrase, "the angel of silence passed over the room."

Then Vassilissa spoke in a low voice: "Thus are you the more blessed."

He looked round and saw her standing by the lamp, holding in her hand a book.

"Listen," she said, and read from it:

" 'Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.'

" 'Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted.'

" 'Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth. . . .'

"Blessed are the peace-makers; for they shall be called the children of God.' "

He said, awestruck: "Truly, I have sought peace, but my people will not have it."

"Yet the power is still yours," she answered, "to lead them in the way and save them."

"They rebel and are proud. How can I give them the humility that earns the Kingdom? How can I show them the meekness that inherits the earth?"

He sat on a bench before her, his clasped hands between his knees, his eyes on her face.

"Only by your example, dear lord." She came and knelt at his feet. "Look you, is it not thus and thus? You have submitted to the enemy and

have gained thereby great power. But you have not submitted to your people. You have imposed your will upon them and they have resisted. I know what is happening. They will lose all by this resistance. You see the end, but you do not see the beginning. Therefore you oppose them the more firmly, the more proudly, and Heaven and earth are lost to you. Who am I to teach you? Yet is not it written? . . . If now, you would yield to your people, by withdrawing from their midst, by leaving them to their own devices, they would turn and submit likewise."

"How could that affect them?" he said hoarsely. "If I desert them, I live and risk leaving them to their fate. If I stay in Novgorod, I die with them."

"They have never doubted that you will stay. They believe your heart is with them all the while. They do not understand your policy. They only love you blindly, selfishly. It is easy to resist and die. It is hard to submit and live. O my lord, will not you choose the harder way and show it to your people?"

"Those were my words to them! I thought only of their stupidity. I had no meekness of my own. Vassa, what shall I do?"

"Go back to the city. Tell them you have tried all means of saving them. It is the end. They must now judge—they, the free people of Novgorod. You will not interfere, nor will you stay. For if they cannot obey, you are no longer their elected prince, you have no right in their midst."

"I see it," he cried, springing to his feet. "Vassa, Vassa, there is still a chance of salvation. My troops shall leave the city. The people, who have been expecting their aid in resistance to the Mongols, will be convinced that the matter lies only between themselves and the enemy. They will turn to me. I shall say, 'If this be your choice, I agree and leave you!' I must go at once."

He drew on his boots and flung his discarded cloak round his shoulders. She brought a lighted lantern and opened the door.

"The snow has ceased to fall," she said, "and the wind will be with you."

"Pray for me, Vassa," he said, taking the lantern and pausing near her in the doorway.

"I never cease to pray for you, my lord."

"O most dear woman, if I succeed, shall I return to you?"

"I will pray for that also, my lord."

He laughed aloud, bent forward and kissed her quickly on the lips. "I love you," he said, "I have always loved you. I thank God for you."

Then he went out into the night.

§

As he struggled back to Novgorod, he remembered that this woman, who had inspired him, was she to whom he had long since promised that the enemy should never come there. He had been forced to break that promise and, when he had been accused of it, he had imagined that her resent-

ful influence must have been at work. Yet she had never doubted his motive, nor had her heart ever wavered in its generous loyalty. Hers was the vital spark which he had hardly hoped to find in the people; hers was the sovereign soul of Russia that

> "lives self-governed and at peace,
> Is centred in itself, taking alike
> Pleasure and pain; heat, cold; glory and shame."[1]

She, erstwhile the sinner, now proved to be the saint, and he, whom all men had extolled, could only approach her by

> "Being of equal grace to comrades, friends,
> Chance-comers, strangers, lovers, enemies,
> Aliens and kinsmen; loving all alike
> Evil or good."[2]

Once more within the city, he laid his plan immediately before the Mongol officials, who approved it so far as to offer the withdrawal of their own troops to a short distance, until it could be tested. Versed in the horrors of war, they desired that their rule should be established by diplomacy rather than by terror, even at the eleventh hour.

To the amazement of the people, therefore, the next day saw the evacuation of the armed forces from their streets. Their surprise turned to consternation when they learned that the Mongols

[1] From "The Song Celestial," or *Bhagavad-Gita* (Chap. VI) trans. by Sir Edwin Arnold. [2] *Ibid.*

would remain on the outskirts of the city, but that the Russian regiments under Alexander's command would be altogether removed. They had imagined that these men had only come as the nominal protectors of the enemy and that, when battle was joined, they would certainly side with free Novgorod.

Now, the citizens felt more than ever betrayed. Yet their confusion was intense. If they were expected to fight, why had the Mongol soldiers withdrawn? If they were expected to yield, why were they still menaced? Passionately they desired a leader to solve the riddle for them. Great was their relief when they heard that Alexander was still in their midst and would address them in the Court of Yaroslav.

He appeared before them, seated on his horse, calm and stern, but with new purpose in his bearing. And they lifted their arms to greet him and shouted as they had done before: "Stay with us, Nevski! Stay with us always! We will die for Holy Sophia and for you!"

"My people," he said, "this is free Novgorod. It is not for me or for anyone to fetter you. The time has come when I cannot even bind you for your own advantage, or for the advantage of Russia. And why? Simply because you refuse to be bound. Therefore, I submit to your will. You ask me to stay, but it is not Nevski you want, it is not a patriot you look for. It is a puppet. The princes of Novgorod have always been puppets. As your

puppet, I must resign, and in resigning, I leave you your liberty. How you use it can be no concern of mine. To-day, Novgorod shall know me no more."

He began to advance through the silent, stricken crowd. But, in another moment, eager hands caught the bridle of his horse, the people were pressing round him, clutching at his hands, his knees, moaning and weeping aloud.

"Leave us not, Nevski, for the love of God, leave us not! We will obey. We will do anything you require of us. If you say that the census must be taken, we will not resist. We will welcome the Tartars. We will bow our heads to the yoke. Only believe in our love! Only stay with us and share our sorrow!"

They lifted him high on their shoulders and carried him in triumph back to the palace. They set him down among the Mongol officials and bowed to the ground before the baskak. They were like beings changed by a miracle. All opposition had vanished from their minds, as when a man, seeking to strike, finds his clenched fist meeting empty air and is left thunderstruck.

By the end of that day the census had been peaceably begun, and in a short time, with the wholehearted co-operation of the people, it had been accomplished, and the Mongols left Novgorod unharmed.

Then, and not till then, Alexander rode out to find Vassilissa again. Relief and hope had renewed

his youth. The past was a dreary and forgotten dream, which could no longer hold him.

"We have won," he cried, "and you are my fate and my reward. Vassa, do you love me?"

"You know it," she answered.

"Then can we never be parted. You are my friend and my comrade and my mate in the sight of God. Away with hypocrisy and empty seeming! I have never lived before! I have never known happiness! Dear saint, if we sin together, Heaven is well lost!"

XXIII

With that discretion which had commanded the love of men even more than her beauty, Vassilissa prevailed on Alexander to let her remain in an obscure house of her own, rather than to appear in public as his mistress. She felt that no shadow of scandal must ever attach to the renowned name of Nevski.

He had been so much separated from his wife, that all the world had wondered at an asceticism that made him superior to the majority of Russians. He had seemed to have no human passions drawing him to the society of women, and had thereby partly earned his reputation of saintliness.

The fact was that his temperament was no less ardent than that of his countrymen, but first the coldness of Alexandra and then the turmoil of his life had caused his whole capability of devotion to be lavished on his people. When these people disappointed him, his wounded heart found solace with the woman who had long since won it and had given him her own. He was now forty years old, in the prime of his manhood, and, for the first time, rigid self-control could be loosened and he could taste natural joy. He loved Vassilissa with the fire of unspoiled youth. Her past was nothing to him. Her simplicity and her fidelity to himself fulfilled his utmost need. The world might say she had been wanton. He knew her virtue better.

While he remained at Novgorod, therefore, he

sought her company as often as he could leave his palace and affairs of state. The modest dwelling within the city, to which she removed, was for him a home and a refuge. Here, forgotten by her former friends and unobserved by others, she lived for him alone. To her he brought all his cares and troubles, and with her he found perfect peace and happiness.

"When I am absent from you, Vassa," he said, "the future still seems dark; but when I am with you, the clouds roll away and I can see further. There is a black time coming for this country, how black I cannot tell, but at times the thought of it oppresses me with horror. I see the people taxed and enslaved, as the result of conquest and of this census, even as they suspected. They will suffer tyranny and injustice, for the Mongols themselves grow weak and Barka Khan is not a great man like Batu. The state of Russia must become worse and not better by this eastern influence, for untold generations. And yet—and yet, I believe that this very admixture of oriental power with the Slav soul is destined to make us a greater nation in the end."

"I understand," she answered. "Do not I also know and respect the best of the Mongols? There is a certain natural kinship between ourselves and them. Remember what one of their men said to us, when we rode together to Mongolia. The only great difference between us is the quality of our land. In us the fertile land has born a soul and a

living faith. In them the wide steppes have produced strong and restless bodies and great minds. It is right that body, brain and soul should be united to make a people."

"Ay, it is right," he said. "And it will be the fate of Russia, her preservation and her distinction among nations. Listen, Vassa, our place in the world is separate, between the west and the east. If we yield to the west, we lose our individuality, for the west has nothing to give us. If, for a time, we yield to the east, our soul, surviving that compact, will at last absorb the mortal element and emerge triumphant. Ah! Vassa, it must, it shall be so! Russia cannot die. The immortal spirit cannot perish! Nay, though the day may come when western influence shall work like a canker in our midst and even slay us, the first influence will prevail and bring about our resurrection."

He foresaw beyond his own and many succeeding ages. He had for a moment the vision of that Power in Whose sight a thousand years are but as a day. It was clear to him that the Mongol yoke would leave its mark on the people for ages, and that even the ultimate overthrow of their empire by native princes would not leave the country free.

For the country, conscious of its own weakness, knowing itself to be a blank space in the map of Europe, would then become the prey of the insidious west. Its democracy would be overlaid with despotism, its dumbly resentful serfs would see

their land snatched from them. The west would offer its civilisation, far inferior to that of the east, to an unripe, an untutored people in vastly spreading spaces, where cities were always less important than the soil in which strong instincts were rooted. Only from those instincts could a national spirit emerge in the end. Only the people themselves could work out their own salvation. When salvation would be thrust on them with ideas infinitely more foreign than any they had imbibed from the Mongol worshippers of Nature, the gift would become their curse and their ruin. Revolution, leading to another and more frightful despotism, would crush them more surely than any conquest. Yet still the vital spark would survive. Their faith would remain. Their religion, in which the love of the land was inextricably mingled, would make it possible for them to emerge, at long last, as a supremely great nation.

§

Alexander, as the appointed prince of Vladimir, Russia's capital, could not stay at Novgorod. He left his son Dmitri there to rule, with sufficient troops to repel the menace of the Teutonic knights on the western frontier, and himself continued as an intercessor between his people and the Mongols. He had no sooner reached Vladimir, where Vassilissa had preceded him to make another home, than he received the news that the princess Alexandra had suddenly died in her convent.

On a fast-day, partaking of a meal of fish, in who knows what penitential humour, a bone had struck in her throat. Choking over the first reality that had ever struck her, she had passed from a world of dreams to a wider sphere.

He could not regret her. He and his Vassa were married by Bishop Cyril in the cathedral of Vladimir as soon as might be.

For one year their happiness was complete. Peace reigned, with the great census completed and the tax-gatherers yet to appear. Russia seemed to breathe again, with Nevski at the helm of the ship of State and Barka Khan too busy to interfere, opposing with his Kipchak hordes and his ally, the Sultan of Egypt, the onslaughts of his mighty relative Hulagu in the south.

Then Vassilissa bore a son to Alexander. It was the pinnacle of her love. She could do no more and she laid down her life in that service.

He kissed her cold lips and said: "I will follow you soon, dear heart. The pledge you have given is the proof that Russia shall endure."

The child, a dark-eyed cherub of uncommon beauty, was called Daniel. And Vassa's body found splendid sepulture in the Convent of the Assumption of the Holy Virgin, where she had gone for her confinement.

Nothing is known of her to-day, except that tomb, where it is recorded that she was Alexander's second wife. Their love is all by which she is remembered, all by which her name has lasted. He

knew well that she would have wanted no other memorial.

§

For him, it was as though Death, in taking her, had also touched his shoulder, as a consoling sign that he had not long to wait. He was dazed and could only feel that all reality had departed from mortal existence. Everything around him seemed suddenly to have become unsubstantial and dim, and, in a world of illusion, he moved feebly like a man lost.

But a day came when he was recalled to duty. At Sarai, the business of collecting Russian taxes had now been farmed to foreign adventurers from Turkestan and Persia. These men employed underlings worse than themselves, Armenians who had never known the Christianity of their own country, and renegade Jews, whose religion was replaced by self-interest. Mongol inspectors, blind to every consideration but the letter of the law, were stationed throughout Russia, where every man's head and every item of property was registered, to support the brutal extortioners, who were ignorant even of the language of their victims. Unknown to Alexander, a reign of terror had begun, in which the last copper coin was squeezed from helpless peasants and arrears of tribute were entered against them on a system of malignant usury. When payment was impossible, the people had to suffer torture. mutilation and slavery.

A single instance sufficed to show Alexander the dreadful situation.

Riding through the country-side near Vladimir, he came to a poor farmstead, on the outskirts of a village, where its scanty population were gathered together in a miserable group. Women, with their hands fettered, were roped together by the neck like cattle and were wailing aloud. The naked and mangled body of a child lay in the roadway, and a few urchins, in pitiful rags, sat dumbly cowering in the dust. In the farmyard, an old man, stripped to the waist, was tied to a post, while a leather-coated Mongol flogged him with a multi-thonged whip tipped with iron, and a mounted official, of Semitic aspect, directed the punishment. Half a dozen younger peasants, bound and guarded by Mongol soldiers, awaited their turn at the whipping-post.

With blazing eyes, Alexander rode straight to the officer and addressed him, first in Russian, then, as the man shook his head and spread out his hands, in the Mongol language.

"What is the meaning of this? I am Nevski, of Vladimir. You shall answer to me if you abuse your authority."

"The people evade their just dues, lord. I am empowered by the Khan to enforce them."

"It shall not be done thus. Set free these muzhiki instantly, the old one first."

"Lord, how can discipline be maintained with interference? There have already been riots in

many places. They have been suppressed with much bloodshed. Therefore it is better to be stern at once."

"The taxes of this village shall be paid in full. I will be responsible. Obey me now."

He commanded as ever, and the Jew, whining and rubbing his hands, with secret resentful glances was obliged to yield his prey. The old peasant, bloody and fainting, was carried into the farm-house, followed by some of the women and the young men, who loudly blessed the name of Alexander.

But one man remained sullen and despondent near the gate, looking with hatred on his late captors.

"You are safe now," said Alexander to him. "The baskak and the soldiers shall return with me to Vladimir and report there."

"What good will that do?" said the man. "My child lies dead in the road. My father will not survive that cruel beating. I would have suffered instead of him, but they would not let me. It was a matter of a few roubles which we could not pay. We are starving, lord; they have taken all we possess to meet the taxes. And still they say we owe the first amount and more. It is the same everywhere. We are in the hands of the accursed."

"What is your name?"

"Mikula."

Alexander shuddered and looked away.

The man gave a bitter laugh. "A good enough

name in Russia once, lord. How does the old song go?

> " 'I will brew me my beer and give my guests cheer,
> I will swill to the full and Mikula extol . . .'

But Mikulushka can no longer plough and till. Mikulushka has no longer any life. Alas!' "

He bowed his head and wept.

"Take heart, Mikula," said Alexander in a broken voice. "I have known grief, too, and it has closed my eyes to your sorrow. But now my eyes are opened. I see that there is work for me still to do. I will live for you and for your salvation."

He dismounted then and went out into the road. He took off his cloak and wrapped it round the dead body of the child, which he gave into the young man's arms.

"My little son is younger than this," he said gently. "He has no mother, and he is born into a sad world. But he will love you, Mikula, as I have loved you. In that hope, renew your life, Mikulushka; plough and till again."

There was little satisfaction to be had from the Mongol authorities at Vladimir. All they knew was that Barka Khan demanded the regular payment of Russian tribute to meet the expenses of his campaigns beyond the Caucasus. If the tax-collectors exceeded their orders in exacting money, it could not be helped. Nevski knew, himself, that the peasants were dishonest and ready to

revolt, with or without provocation. Also they had a superstitious antipathy for Jews, who were nevertheless the cleverest financiers. This particular baskak had proved himself a useful servant of the Mongol Government and could not be dismissed on an accusation of severity.

There was nothing that Alexander could do here. One village might be saved, by paying its tribute out of his own purse. Meanwhile, hundreds of others were suffering in the same way. The only course was for him to go to Sarai and seek justice from the Khan of the Golden Horde.

He would take the richest possible gifts to satisfy Barka's greed. His petitions should be simpler and more reasonable than they had ever been before.

In a world of shadows, where he was loath to linger, one thing alone was real enough to keep his whole attention—the safety of his people. Beyond, in a golden light, Vassa, his love, awaited him. Here, in the darkness, Mikula, the great legendary symbol of Russia's peasantry, retained him.

He stayed at Vladimir only long enough to arrange with Bishop Cyril the future of his infant son Daniel.

"If I am long delayed, or if I never return," he said, "the inheritance of Daniel must be the town of Moscow and the villages in its neighbourhood. Something tells me that this may become the heart of Russia, rather than Vladimir or even

free Novgorod. That little city on the river Moskva has a central situation in a fertile country, that places it in touch with the interests of the peasants. I intend that Daniel should depend on the people, who are the real strength of the land, rather than on the boyars who foment discord. The day of Novgorod is done, for its liberty is become a delusion and its future can only be founded on trade wherein our people do not excel. Princes may struggle for the possession of Vladimir, and the time may come when they will attempt to make a new capital, nearer to the west. But Moscow will be the real capital, because its peaceful land will always invite settlers. And I would have Daniel the first of the Moscovite princes."

"He will be loved for your sake, dear son," said Bishop Cyril. "He will surely inherit your virtues and under him and his heirs Great Russia will be born."

Thus Alexander and Cyril looked into the future. And the dark-eyed baby, he who was to be known as Holy Daniel, for his strong yet gentle character, stayed for a time in the devoted care of Russian ladies at the court of Vladimir, and knew no grief even when his father rode away.

XXIV

It had been bitter humiliation for Alexander to bow before Barka when Ulvachi was alive. It was even more bitter now that Ulvachi was dead and Barka was Khan in name as well as deed. For now Alexander came not in answer to a summons from the Golden Horde, but presented himself uninvited as a supplicant.

He was shown at once that he was unwelcome and that he was considered as of small account. The title of prince was not accorded to him, but he was ironically called Grand Duke and by great and small alike was made to feel that he was destitute of all power.

Barka adopted towards him an insolent air of patronage and displeasure. By what right, he demanded, did Nevski come to make complaints of the Mongol rule in Russia, or to ask favours of his conquerors? Barka had no time to attend to such trivialities. If he chose to stay, the matter might in time be investigated, but at present the Khan saw no need to listen to idle rumours of distress. In fact, Barka was in a particularly evil mood, due to a local authority that was too great for him and to the knowledge that this authority could not be extended beyond the Caspian, against his powerful ally the Sultan of Egypt on one hand and their mighty antagonist Hulagu on the other hand.

Alexander chose to stay at Sarai in the hope of

obtaining justice. The splendid city had changed since he had seen it last. It was crowded with people of many nationalities and various religious faiths, and, instead of the Mongol warriors of the homeland, who had been worthy of respect, it was garrisoned chiefly with wild Kipchak tribesmen, who were the Khan's favourite troops.

Barka himself had become a Mohammedan and already the disintegrating influence of a faith foreign to his countrymen was apparent among them. Islam only suited the Mongols according to the locality of their empire. Thus in Turkestan and Persia their rule flourished under the Prophet's faith natural to those countries, and later they were able to force it successfully on India. But in Russia, the power of the Golden Horde was bound to wane under any religion but Christianity or Shamanism, just as in Mongolia and in China Mongol hardihood was disrupted by Lama-Buddhism.

Among these people of Sarai, Alexander found himself an alien and a stranger. Had he known it, two noble adventurers of the west, Niccolo and Maffeo Polo, had but lately left the city, where they had stayed for a year, bound on their first great journey to the Far East. If he had met them, he must have recognised them as friends and would have realised that the Latin Empire, capable of producing such great gentlemen, had its virtues.

He heard that Kubilai, whom he had encountered and respected in Mongolia, was now Great Khan

and ruler of the conquered empire of northern China. But China was too distant for him to claim help from Kubilai, even could he have sent any message there.

Once more he lived in a world of shadows and now these shadows were hostile, so that he moved in an atmosphere of nightmare, alone yet harassed. He felt that he had outlived his age, that he appeared somehow ridiculous and out of date in the company of people who suddenly seemed to him incomprehensible.

When he tried to approach them, they eluded him. When he preserved his dignity, they slighted him openly. He could only be at peace, alone within the one Christian church of the city.

To add to his sense of desolation, life at Sarai was luxurious and expensive, and he had little money. Formerly, he had enjoyed the Khan's hospitality. But now he was expected to fend for himself, and neither he nor his small retinue could afford the purchase of slaves to attend them or any but the poorest lodging and the most meagre food. They were like derelicts in a land of plenty where no one cared.

Outwardly, Alexander maintained his courage. Yet his health was failing. As the slow months passed, every day found him a little weaker, a little slower and more grey. Now, he could no longer join the great hunting parties of the court. He could neither buy nor borrow fresh horseflesh and must save his own.

He was liable to strange fainting fits that left him feeble as a child. He had attacks of nausea and ague, which he had never known before in all his strenuous life and which made him so helpless that he felt as though his forty-two years had been doubled. He struggled manfully for strength.

"Soon I shall be well," he said to his anxious druzhina. "The Khan cannot neglect us much longer. When he will listen to me, he will surely promise justice to Russia. Then we can leave this place and return to Vladimir and I shall recover."

They knew well that, if his escape was delayed, he would die at Sarai.

The time dragged on and he had to be carried into Barka's presence, when he was at last summoned to state his case. He had devoted the long period of waiting to the indictment of a report, soldierly and concise, embodying his plea for mercy. This had to pass through various secretaries and interpreters, before Barka, purposely dense, would deign to understand it. Then there was further exasperating suspense while he claimed to consider it and sent for his falcons to be displayed for the visitor's entertainment.

But Alexander had borne enough. He raised himself on his elbow in the litter where he lay and stared Barka out of countenance, with blue eyes blazing in his wasted face.

"Have done with this fooling, O Barka Khan!" he cried. "Set your name to the parchment, where

I exact your promise that for the future my people shall have the right of appeal to their princes against the tyranny of foreign baskaks, and let me go hence. Or, by the God above us, the spirit of your great brother, Batu, will blast your name for ever!"

"How should Batu know?" stuttered Barka. "He never cared for Sartach. And I did not kill Ulvachi. . . . He lies, who told Batu so. . . . Ha! Give me my seal. I will promise anything. There is death in Nevski's eyes. Let him take his parchment and go."

At last, after a long year of misery, they were free. At last there was some guarantee that future princes of Russia might be able to uphold the rights of the peasantry.

And for this concession, Alexander had given his life. He was too ill to attempt the homeward route overland. Not even the sense of duty accomplished, not even the final victory won, could restore him now to a world he wanted to leave.

He was carried to the landing-stage on the Volga and placed on a northward-bound boat. Like one of his Varangian ancestors, who had penetrated the Russian land by its waterways, he would make his last journey on the bosom of what, in days to come, was to be the greatest of Russian rivers.

As they set forth, the world indeed seemed remote. The calm sea-like expanse of the Volga was like a glimpse of eternity. The wide, opalescent horizon held no scenery to distract the mind, no earthly beauties to fetter the soul. But through

it, mortal life could slip, smoothly, easily, like a thread of silk through a pierced pearl.

How perfect was such life, without memory of pain or sorrow, running out to a fuller life beyond. Islands lay like flecks in the pearl, without spoiling its symmetry. . . .

When the Serpent Hills of Samara and the high chalk cliffs were in sight, Alexander lay unconscious for long periods and only opened his eyes to say softly: "I have seen those hills before. There is still far to go ere we reach home."

He seemed troubled again, as the gorges of wooded heights recalled the nests of pirates.

"Places of refuge," he murmured. "Ay, they may be wanted and I shall not be there to help. Alas! my people, herein is not your strength—only a passing glory!"

But as they travelled on between dense forests, past the shore of Kazan and gradually through rich corn-growing land, he seemed to revive. They were leaving foreign Bulgar territory behind. They were approaching what was then the border of the Russian land.

The boatmen broke into their dreamy chant:

"Down the river Volga,
The great stretch of water,
Flies the bird of fire,
The fairy King's daughter.
But up stream a-ha! Witch Baba Yaga
Sweeps the skies, as she flies,
On her mortar."

Ah! dear Russian land, is any fantasy like your fantasy, with its brooding sadness and its soaring joy, when you express your soul in song? Holy Russia, beloved country, thanks be to God for the glad sight once more of your tender mists and your gleaming lights. . . .

The end was near. At Nizni Novgorod, his attendants took him on shore to seek help from priests or physicians. An urgent message was sent to Bishop Cyril. Monks from the town of Gorodets offered shelter in their monastery, and Alexander was carried there at once.

A large crowd followed his litter, tramping silently along the wide road. The news spread like wild-fire: "It is Nevski, the saviour of Russia! He has returned to lay his blessed bones among us. He is on his way to join the saints of Heaven!"

When the Abbot received him, he looked up with a faint smile.

"Permit me to join your brotherhood, father," he said. "For, as you see, I have done with this world."

He was consecrated as he lay in the courtyard, and the watchful throng of people broke suddenly into a wild tumult of weeping. Alexander turned his serene face towards them.

"How now, is this the way you speed my passing?" he said. "Do you love me so little that you would break my heart with pity for your grief, before I go?"

They fell on their knees then, crossing themselves and praying him to remember them in Paradise.

In the western sky, the sun hung like a crimson ball, sinking in a flaming sea. The whole wide landscape was tinged with rosy light and streaked with violet shadows.

Bishop Cyril had arrived on horseback. He knelt at Alexander's side and supported the dying figure in his arms.

"My son, my dear son, all is well. Your little Daniel shall not be left alone."

Alexander nodded with closed eyes. Then he looked up and an expression of wonder and delight transformed his countenance.

"Vassa!" he said, and seemed instantly to fall asleep.

The crimson ball vanished from the western sky. The violet shadows grew deeper. Bishop Cyril rose and lifted his hand in blessing over the prostrate people.

"My children," he said, "go softly hence! The sun of the Russian land is set."

Quietly, without wailing or tears, they went away, their patient shoulders bowed, their heavy feet treading the dust of the wide road.

The body of him whom they had loved would be removed to Vladimir, where it would manifest miracles and his name would thus be canonised by the Orthodox Church. In time to come, that same holy body, found to be incorruptible, would be taken to the bank of the river Neva, for which

he had fought. There it would be specially enshrined in the new city that sprang from the western influence he had resisted.

His people did not guess these strange events. But in their hearts was a wider knowledge—the knowledge that the land which had once produced Alexander Nevski must, after a long night-time, see another dawn.

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Note.—"The Song of Sorrow" and "The Song of Mikula the Villager" are quoted with kind permission of Miss J. Currie from *The Heroic Ballads of Russia*, by L. Magnus. The stories of Dobrynya Gold-belt and of Churilo Plenkovich were suggested by two of the old ballads. My warm thanks are due to the help and advice received from: Mr. L. C. Wharton (Librarian of the School of Slavonic Studies), Monsieur and Madame G. de Wessilitsky, Colonel N. Belaiew, C.B., Monsieur T. de Gruenman, and par-

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